the courage of stars

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at https://archiveofourown.org/works/53074699.

Rating:
Mature

Archive Warning:
Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings

Categories:
Gen, M/M

Fandoms:
DCU (Comics), Teen Titans (Comics), Superboy (Comics)

Relationships:
Tim Drake/Kon-El | Conner Kent, Clark Kent & Kon-El | Conner Kent, Martha Kent & Kon-El | Conner Kent, Bart Allen & Kon-El | Conner Kent, Kon-El | Conner Kent & Kara Zor-El, Kon-El | Conner Kent & Krypto the Superdog, Kon-El | Conner Kent & Lori Luthor (DCU Comics), Kon-El | Conner Kent & Lindsay Wah, Kon-El | Conner Kent & Lois Lane

Characters:
Kon-El | Conner Kent, Martha Kent, Krypto the Superdog (DCU), Bart Allen, Tim Drake, Lori Luthor (DCU Comics), Clark Kent, Kara Zor-El, Lindsay Wah, Lois Lane

Additional Tags:
Character Study, Past Character Death, Suicidal Thoughts, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder - PTSD, Internalized Homophobia, Self-Harm, Pre-Relationship, Kon-El | Conner Kent-centric

Language:
English

Stats:
Published: 2024-01-16 Completed: 2024-03-10 Words: 29,582 Chapters: 3/3

the courage of stars

by merils

Summary

Kon stares down into his tea. Lois's hand is warm on his shoulder.

"Kal," he says, hollow. "…Do you ever… Do you ever wish you didn't come back?"

He can feel Lois stiffen, can hear both of their heart rates increase. They exchange looks over his head, but he doesn't care enough to look up, shame sitting heavy in his gut.

"What do you mean, Kon?" Kal asks. His voice is gentle, but Kon knows him well enough to hear the fierce worry, the protective steel beneath it.

After so long being held in, the words all but pour out. Kon swallows a too-hot sip of tea that doesn't scald going down. "I was made to be like you," he says. "You died saving the world. I was—don't you get it? Kal, I was made to die saving the world. I was *made* to die. And I *did.* So—" His voice cracks. "So why am I *back?"*

Notes

This fic deals with themes of internalized homophobia and suicidal ideation, as well as sexual themes and self-destructive behaviors. (I tagged this as "self harm" but it's not something the character doing it realizes is a form of self harm, so be aware of the unreliable narration).

> *You taught me the courage of stars before you left*
> *How light carries on endlessly even after death*
> *With shortness of breath, you explained the infinite*
> *How rare and beautiful it is to even exist*

- "Saturn" by Sleeping At Last.

Chapter 1: the stars are hidden

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Sometimes, Kon-El dreams of dying.

The details vary. Sometimes, he relives the exact memory—falling amid all the rubble, bloody and battered and broken. Other times, it just happens again. Somewhere else, somehow else, but it ends the same: he's trapped in the dark, coughing wetly in the dust, his body heavy with the knowledge that as the agony fades to numbness, death follows.

The darkness and the crushing weight and the excruciating pain are all constant, though, every single time. He's weak, weaker than he's ever felt, his left leg wrenched and broken so badly it may as well have been completely torn off for all he can feel it; he can't lift his arms. A metal rod skewers through the lower right side of his rib cage, grinding against his bones with every agonized breath that rattles through him. He's too weak to cough. He'll soon choke on his own blood.

It takes a *lot* of force to impale a Kryptonian. Even a weakened one.

Sometimes, he dreams of Cassie pulling the thickest slab of concrete off him, letting the light pour in on his last moments. He dreams of the way she *screamed.* Of how desperately he wanted to make her smile, one last time. Of how he needed her to know he was okay with this. That he always knew he'd die a hero's death, one day; that it was okay to let him go.

He didn't make her smile, in the end. The last thing he saw was her tears. He didn't even have the strength to lift his hand to wipe any of them away.

Other times, in his dreams, no one finds him. He stays there, trapped in the dark, his blood pooling in his mouth and rattling in his throat because he can't cough, not with that rod spearing through his insides and grinding against his ribs. He stays there, too weak to move, too weak to cry out but not too weak to cry, and knows he'll never see the sun again. And after an eternity of fading, finally, the darkness takes him in full.

The worst part of these dreams, though, is what happens next:

After he dies, he always, *always* wakes up.

As always, Kon comes back to himself tangled in sweaty sheets, lying on his back and staring up at a ceiling that he swears is only seconds from caving in on him. His heart thunders in his chest; the wind blows outside, the farmhouse creaks ever-so-slightly as it settles, and a jolt of pure *terror* stabs through his gut.

“Don’t be stupid,” he mutters, rolling onto his side and curling up, knees to his chest. “House isn’t falling on you, moron.”

And even if it did, the farmhouse roof is way lighter than that whole giant fucking tower. Up here on the second floor, he’d just get hit by a couple beams, attic insulation, and some shingles. And he’s not already weakened and injured like he was back then. He’s fine.

He’s *fine.*

Unfortunately, the adrenaline thrumming through his veins isn’t interested in that sort of logic. His heart keeps racing, clawing its way up into his throat; every little sound makes him jump again.

They put up that big-ass statue of him at Titans Tower, framed by all those flowery platitudes about his *heroic sacrifice*. Kon snorts at the thought, arms wrapped around himself as if that might stop his trembling. If only everyone could see their brave savior now, terrified out of his mind by a creaky old roof.

He’s supposed to be fine.

Krypto stirs as Kon steels himself, pushes the covers aside, and sits up; he’s sprawled out at the foot of the bed, barely able to keep his eyes open as he lifts his head. A needle of guilt joins the dull blade lodged in Kon’s stomach.

“Hey,” he murmurs, leaning over to smooth a hand down his side. “Sorry to bother you, buddy. Go back to sleep.”

Krypto stares at him for several seconds, but eventually drops his head back to the blankets and closes his eyes. Kon keeps stroking from his ears down to his back; Krypto’s fur is soft, and it helps that he clearly feels safe enough to conk out like this. The house isn’t about to collapse on them, or Ma in her bedroom downstairs; everything is, in theory, okay.

He takes a breath. Blows it out. Feels the chill of ice crystals on the inside of his lower lip, barely there before they melt away. Moonlight falls across the floor; outside his window, he can see the starry night sky stretching on and on for eternity. Krypto's heart beats slow and steady beneath his hand. Ma snores softly in her bed. The night wind whispers through the apple tree in the back yard.

Kon is alive.

Dread pools in his gut, black, thick, oily, cloying.

God help him, he's *alive.*

In the end, Kon just goes down to the kitchen and makes breakfast.

He never can fall back asleep after those dreams, and sunrise is only an hour or so out anyway, so there's no point in bothering to lie there in bed wishing desperately for everything to just *stop.* May as well get coffee going, start frying strips of bacon and thick, fluffy homemade pancakes, so food will be ready and plated by the time Ma wakes up.

She always does so much for him. This is the least he can do for her. Pa's death clearly has taken its toll on her; she still smiles when she sees him, but it's always sadder than he remembers. Sometimes, Kon notices her gazing at him so wistfully it *hurts;* he knows that, though she'd never say it to him, she wishes Pa would come back to her, too. The way Clark did, before; the way Kon has, now.

Krypto comes ambling downstairs, enticed by the scent of bacon and eggs. He stretches at the bottom of the stairs, tail wagging lazily, and yawns.

Kon smiles. "Morning, buddy," he murmurs. Krypto pads over to the side of the counter and waits; Kon grabs a strip of bacon and tosses it over to him. "You hungry?"

Krypto scarfs it down in one bite, of course, then sits back on his haunches to wait for more. Spoiled little beast, Kon thinks fondly, and immediately feels horrible for it. Krypto deserves whatever he wants. He tried to save Kon's life, and Superboy Prime kicked him across Smallville. He could've killed him. Krypto *loves* him, and Kon—

His heart lurches unsteadily in his chest, and he all but drops his spatula to the spoon rest in a clatter. His knees hit the floor a little harder than they should, and he wraps his arms around Krypto, buries

his face in his fur. “You’re a good dog, Krypto,” he whispers. Why is his throat so raw? Why is his chest so tight? “You’re a really, really good dog.”

Krypto leans into him, tail wagging gently against the floor. He yawns again, rests his chin on Kon’s shoulder, and lets him cling.

The pancake on the stove sizzles. Kon flips it with a flick of TTK, still holding onto Krypto. God, where did all this sorrow come from? Why does he suddenly want to cry?

But water’s running in the main bathroom. Ma’s awake. Kon takes a shaky breath, holds onto Krypto a little tighter for—one heartbeat, two—and then he lets go.

By the time Ma steps into the kitchen, three pancakes are neatly stacked in her plate, and fresh, strong coffee (with a touch of milk and one spoon of sugar) is in the middle of stirring itself in her favorite mug. Krypto, sated with the first pancake and some more bacon, is sprawled out on the rug under the table—his homemade dog food is hot and fresh in his bowl, waiting for him, but if he’d rather lie in wait and hope for some more of Kon and Ma’s breakfast, that’s his prerogative.

Honestly, Ma’s pancake recipe is bitchin’, so Kon really can’t blame him.

“Good morning! What’s all this?” Ma asks, shuffling into the kitchen. “Conner, dear heart. Thank you for making breakfast. What’s the occasion?”

Kon swallows down the last of his melancholy and offers her a crooked smile. “Morning, Ma. No occasion, honestly; I just… I dunno. Felt like it.”

He can’t tell her he couldn’t sleep. Kryptonians under a yellow sun don’t really need as much sleep as humans do, anyway, and all it’d do is make her worry.

“Felt like spoiling that dog of yours, too, I see,” Ma says wryly, peering under the table. Krypto licks his nose, his tail thumping against the rug, and Ma laughs. “Do you need help with anything?”

“Nah, I got it.” Kon waves her towards the table. “You sit and eat while it’s hot! I’ll join you as soon as this one’s done frying.”

Ma pats his shoulder fondly as she passes by. “Alright, alright. Thank you again, dear.”

She pauses for a moment, as if she wants to say something more, and Kon holds his breath. If she’s noticed—if she’s noticed he isn’t sleeping these days, that he’s spending more and more time out here at the farm and avoiding the Titans like the plague—

But she doesn’t say anything. Just squeezes his shoulder, and lets go. Her footsteps are soft against the creaky wooden floor.

They sit down to eat. Neither of them takes Pa’s chair. Forks clink against plates; the scent of coffee wafts into the air. Ma glances at Kon, but he keeps his eyes on his plate. He’s fine.

He swallows a mouthful of bitchin’ pancakes that tastes like ashes on his tongue.

The empty chair to his left has a stare that bores holes into his very soul. Kon flicks his eyes to it. He can’t hold its gaze for long.

Pa’s the one who’s dead.

Pa’s dead.

So why does it feel like *Kon* is the ghost haunting this house?

(His empty plate has no answer.)

“What was it like for you?” Bart asks. His thumbs fly across the joysticks and buttons so fast they’re a blur; on-screen, a truly ludicrous combo flashes, accompanied by a dazzling storm of colors and lights, and Kon’s character goes careening off the stage.

Kon groans. He respawns at the top of the stage—two lives left—and prepares himself to inevitably get his shit rocked again. “What was what like?”

“Dying,” Bart says.

Kon freezes so violently he forgets to catch himself, and his character falls right off the stage on his own, no flashy combos from Bart needed.

“It, uh.” He tries to swallow, but his throat is coated in sand. The phantom tang of iron clings to the roof of his mouth. “Well, it was not

very fun, I can tell you that."

Bart pauses the game and twists around on the sofa to look at him. Kon wishes he wouldn't. Bart's a little too good at reading him, when he wants to be, and Kon—he can't.

"Yeah, no shit," Bart says. He sets his controller down and scoots through a turn to face Kon properly. "Same here. But I mean like—the actual *dying* part of it. Not everything that led up to it."

At least Bart doesn't have superhearing. At least he can't tell just how hard Kon's heart is pounding in his chest right now. "Yeah? Whaddya mean? 'Cuz I mean like, it was… I was alive, and then I wasn't. I dunno, Bart. What was it like for you?"

Bart chews at his lower lip. His hair falls across his forehead; he shakes his head like a dog to toss it back. "It was like… being torn apart," he says after a moment. "The Speed Force. It's… hard to describe what it's like in there. It's like… it's so *much.* And it feels so amazing to just let go and become one with it. But you forget who you are if you do that. Max told me once, about how he would use that to skip to the future sometimes, 'cuz it's so easy to… I dunno exactly how he put it, but like… it's easy to just lose your entire self in it. And when you're dead, and your body isn't *alive* to tether you back to, like, reality, then…"

He trails off. Shrugs. One strap of his overalls falls down his shoulder to his arm; he doesn't bother to adjust it.

"So I was just wondering, I guess." Bart's lightning-golden eyes are pensive; suddenly, Kon understands. "What it was like to die for someone who's not a speedster."

Yeah. Kon gets it now.

This is Bart, asking for reassurance, in some roundabout fashion. He's upset about his own death. He's freaked out by everything that happened after it, until he got pulled out. *That's* why he's asking about Kon's experiences.

He doesn't need to know about the grinding of metal against bone, the rod speared between Kon's ribs keeping him held down. He doesn't need to know how many different places Kon's leg broke, or how close his arm was to being fully ripped off. He doesn't need to know that to Kon, death simply tastes of blood, dust, and despair.

Victory. That's the taste of victory. To die a hero's death, saving the world—it's what Kon was made for. But that's not what Bart is asking, and it's not what he needs to hear.

He just needs Kon to support him right now. That's what this is.

"Honestly, Imp, it's… nothing compared to all that," Kon answers truthfully. What he went through was—was—(horrific, traumatic, terrifying, excruciating)—kinda shitty, sure, but at least nothing was actively tearing apart his entire sense of self. "I was there, and everything hurt, and then I felt really tired, and then I blacked out. And then the next thing I knew, I was waking up in the Fortress of Solitude and everyone was saying it was a thousand years later, and there you were."

Bart chews at his lower lip some more. "…So… you just lost that whole chunk of time?"

Kon—

Winces.

"Yeah," he admits. He's been trying not to think too hard about that. "Guess I did."

"Huh." Bart's brows draw together. "…Huh. I mean, I don't remember most of it, but I have a sense that, like, time *passed.* That sucks."

Kon shrugs one shoulder and hopes none of the dread in the pit of his stomach shows on his face. "It's fine, I guess. I mean—I don't love it, but it is what it is, and all that." He reaches over, adjusts Bart's overall strap back onto his shoulder. "I'll manage."

Bart looks at him for a long, long moment. If it feels long to Kon, it must be an eternity for Bart, and Kon wants to squirm under his gaze. Sometimes, he thinks Bart can see right through him. It's a little terrifying.

But Bart doesn't say any of the things Kon's scared of. He just leans over and bonks his forehead into his shoulder. Lingers, stays close to him, and then, to Kon's surprise, clambers into his lap entirely.

"Whoa," Kon laughs, uncertain. Bart wraps his arms around his shoulders and rests his pointy chin atop his head. A tiny blossom of warmth starts to unfurl in Kon's chest as he slips his arms around Bart's waist, too.

"'M sorry," Bart mumbles, his fingers curling into Kon's shirt. "Don't think I ever said that before."

Kon's laughter stills. He hugs Bart a little tighter. "For what?"

"That I couldn't save you." Bart's voice is small. "I—we tried. Really hard. But he still…"

Killed you, Bart doesn't (can't) say. The budding warmth in Kon's chest freezes solid.

"Hey." He reaches up, rests his hand atop Bart's fluffy head. He's alive. He's alive. He's alive. "That's crazy talk. It's not your fault. You got nothin' to be sorry for, Imp."

Bart heaves a sigh. "Still."

It's not *fair*.

It's not fair that Bart has to carry the weight of Kon's death, too—why did it have to fall on everyone he loves? Why can't he carry it himself, take all the pain for them? Why does death have to hurt all of them more than it hurt him? And why does he still have the gall to hurt over it, when they've all suffered so much more?

"It's not your fault at all," Kon repeats. The Smash Ultimate pause menu stares at him from the TV. "There's nothing for me to forgive."

Bart sighs again, like Krypto when he's really contemplating a nap. He squeezes Kon tighter. "Hey, Kon?"

"Yeah?"

Bart draws back to look at him, his golden eyes a little too piercing. But his smile is soft as he cups Kon's face in his hands and squishes his cheeks. He grins a little, then knocks their foreheads together. "I'm gonna kick your ass this round again."

A little ember kindles in Kon's heart again, miniscule and fragile but there. He shakes his head ruefully as Bart clambers out of his lap to grab his controller again.

"Yeah," he sighs. Bart's head falls against his shoulder with a fond *thump*. "You probably are."

"Hey."

Lori lingers in the doorway; Simon and Sajan are already clomping down the stairs after Krypto, drawn by the siren song of Ma's announcement that the peach cobbler's ready.

Kon looks up from his desk. There's a photo of him and Cassie here—they went to an arcade together, in San Francisco; their cheeks are smushed together as they both grin ear to ear, holding the massive plushies they both won for each other. Kon's hot pink teddy bear is still on his bed.

Lori's studying him, still in the doorway. Her brown eyes are filled with far too much softness for Kon to bear. If she asks if he's doing alright, he swears…

Kon tilts his head at her. "You don't want cobbler?"

"Oh, I do," she assures him, a tart smile flickering across her face before it fades again. "Don't you?"

"Yeah, I was about to head down." Kon glances at the photo again. He can't decide if he wants to keep staring, or to to put it in a drawer and never see it again. "You can go on ahead, I'll be there in a sec."

Lori purses her lips. "You and your Titans girlfriend broke up, huh?"

Blunt as ever. Kon sighs, rubbing the back of his neck awkwardly. "Uh, yeah, a little while ago."

Lori's head tilts to the side as she studies him. "Are you… you don't seem all that torn up about it, exactly, but, like…?"

Oh, no. This is dangerous territory. Kon's been avoiding thinking of Cassie much. He loves her, he knows that much, but he can't deny the sense of relief that's made itself at home deep in his chest since they broke up.

He loves her, but was he ever actually *in love* with her?

He thinks he might already know the answer, but he can't possibly let that be the case, because if the answer is what he thinks it is, the guilt will be insurmountable.

"I'm okay, Lori," Kon says. "I'm the one who broke up with her. I'm fine. Just a little, uh… I dunno. Awkward about it. We said we wanna stay friends, but it's like, y'know…"

Lori makes a face. “I don’t actually know,” she says. “I’ve never dated anyone seriously. But I believe you that that’s awkward as hell. How do you go back to being ‘just friends’ after, like, sticking your tongues down each other’s throats?”

…Blunt! As ever!

“Honestly, that isn’t even the awkwardest part.”

And yet, Kon’s face is hot. He doesn’t really want to think about touching Cassie like that—his hands wandering her back, his mouth on hers. His fingers tangling in her long, golden hair, all her curves pressed to his body. He doesn’t know *why* remembering it makes him feel queasy, but—

But it does. Big time.

“Then what is?” Lori asks.

It doesn’t make sense. Kon likes girls—of course he does! But there *must* be something wrong with him about it, because Cassie is an absolutely incredible girl, strong and smart and beautiful to boot, and yet thinking about her like that makes his stomach twist into hollow knots. What’s the matter with him? He loves her, he *knows* he loves her.

For crying out loud, he died in her arms, trying to make her smile one last time. Of *course* he loves her.

And yet…

“It’s, uh.”

It’s trying to stop feeling guilty for how incredibly relieved he is, now that they’ll never end up with each other’s tongues down each other’s throats ever again.

Kon stuffs the photo frame into his desk drawer, shuts the drawer with a *thunk!,* and stands, his chair scraping over the floor behind him. Lori’s eyes follow him.

“It’s nothing,” he says dismissively, flapping a hand. “C’mon, let’s go get some cobbler before those two polish all of it off.”

“Okay, but Conner, you know, if you ever do need to talk about it…” Lori trails off, then shakes her head.

Kon suppresses a sigh of relief. He doesn't want to have to let her down or lie to her.

"Never mind," she says, and claps him on the shoulder. "You're right. They better have left us some, or there'll be hell to pay."

They walk down the stairs together. Kon thinks of the photo frame, stuffed into obsoletion in his desk drawer, and nearly winces. He hopes it's not too dark in there. He's okay with dying alone in the dark, but Cassie doesn't deserve that.

He forces it out of his mind. It's just a photograph, and there's peach cobbler to be had.

And if Lori's eyes linger on him over the kitchen countertop, well… he can simply pretend not to notice.

Mortality never stares Kon in the face quite as keenly as when he looks at Tim's bare back.

Of all of Kon's friends and family, Tim has the most scars by far. Slices, stabs, gunshots, burns—they paint a portrait of a life of violence. A life of throwing himself between helpless civilians and blades or bullets. The most discomfiting is the mottled burn scar that runs up from the base of his neck into his hair. Weeks ago, he told Kon how he got it—he got caught in an explosion, during that year Kon missed.

It's still jarring. To Kon, so many of these scars just sprouted on Tim's body overnight. Like he blinked, and Tim suddenly went through a warzone. He knows, logically, that it's the same for Cassie, for Clark, for everyone, but the map of past pain on Tim's skin really just drives it home.

What a way to tell that he's really missed an entire year of his loved ones' lives.

He gently brushes Tim's hair aside so none of it catches in the tape, then seals down the last side of the gauze pad with medical adhesive, careful not to leave a single air bubble. It's a big cut, long but thankfully shallow, running diagonally along the back of Tim's shoulder; he said had to ditch the cape to protect a kid in the wrong place at the wrong time, and over the course of a fight, the kevlar of his suit was damaged enough that a hard blow from an axe sliced through just a little bit.

It could've been worse. It could've been a lot worse. Kon knows that. Tim's *had* a lot worse and survived before.

And yet, beneath a deceptive layer of TTK, Kon's hands are still shaking.

"All done," he says, his hands lingering over Tim's shoulder. Hesitant, he smooths Tim's hair back into place over the nape of his neck; it's soft and silky, rippling like water around his fingers. Dry, though. He could stand to put some oil in it or at least use better conditioner, if he's gonna keep it longer like this.

Maybe he's just keeping it long these days because of that scar.

"Thanks," Tim says. He sighs, slowly rolling his head in a circle, then shakes out his good arm, clearly feeling a bit stiff from sitting there and waiting for Kon to finish patching him up.

There's a rainbow of half-healed old bruises along his ribs—none of them are broken, though; Kon checked—and a few dark smudges near his hip from tonight's escapades. Kon's eyes linger on the lithe lines of his body, the wiry muscles moving under his skin as he stretches his arm up over his head.

Finally, Tim drops his hands back to his lap and twists around on the stool with a wry little smile. "I owe you one."

Kon snorts. "No, you don't. I told you I'd come anytime you call, didn't I?"

"Still kinda embarrassing to have to call you just 'cuz I can't reach where I need to bandage without bleeding all over the floor." Tim wrinkles his nose. "I thought that was more of a, like, 'anytime I need Krypto's supersniffer, or anytime I need someone punted into the stratosphere' sorta thing, y'know?"

Another snort. Kon starts gathering the bloodied alcohol wipes and gauze wrappers to throw in the trash. "I said anytime, and I meant anytime, dumbass. You want me to come over to help patch you up, I'll do it. Sheesh, only you would be embarrassed by something like that…"

Tim laughs. It's nice; Kon likes seeing him laugh. He's been through a lot, in this year that Kon missed. He deserves to laugh more.

"In my defense, it's *so* not only me. Dick would be mortified about it,

too. And Bruce, if he was capable of feeling embarrassment, I think. Cass, I dunno, maybe, but…"

Kon throws up his hands. "Okay, okay, I get it, you're *all* freaks! My point still stands."

Tim laughs again. His eyes are warm, lingering on Kon as he packs up the first aid kit; when Kon sneaks a quick glance at him, though, the look on his face is—

It's tender, wistful, and yearning, and so fond it must ache. It's a look that screams *I missed you, I lost you, I'm terrified of losing you again, I missed you,* so raw and potent that Kon almost stumbles where he stands, unable to meet his gaze. This is what happens every time he makes Tim laugh these days. He doesn't know how he'll ever move forward when Tim looks at him like that.

Tim is a man drowning at sea, and Kon is the spar of driftwood that's returned to him amidst the roiling waves. Tim is a wanderer lost in the desert, and Kon is the first sip of cool water he's had in days. Tim is the desert, and Kon is the spring rains.

He's always known Tim loves him—they've been best friends for so long, of *course* he knows—but to have it written so plainly across his face…

Tim isn't someone who usually wears his heart on his sleeve. Kon doesn't even know if he knows he's doing it right now. Or maybe he isn't at all, and Kon has just learned to read him too well not to see it anyway.

"So." Tim's voice draws him out of his wandering thoughts. "I'd feel bad calling you all the way out here just to make you slap some gauze on my shoulder and then sending you packing, and I mean, I don't have anything pressing to work on tonight anyways, so, like, if you wanna hang for a bit…?"

"Yeah, totally." Kon shoves all the uncertainty and… whatever that feeling tugging at his chest is, anyway, down into a box where he doesn't have to think about them. "Any good movies I missed last year?"

Tim taps a finger to his chin in thought. "Hmm… yeah, I can think of a couple you might like. I haven't really been watching that many movies myself lately, though, so we can also just browse and see what we find."

“Sounds good. Wanna sort them by worst ratings and see what the shittiest movie we can find out there is?” It’s a classic pastime. They’ve found many gems this way, both just the two of them and the whole squad, before…

Before. Full stop.

Tim grins. “You’re on.”

And that’s how they find themselves sprawled out on Tim’s sofa, side-by-side, with a bowl of popcorn balanced on Kon’s thigh and two cans of Zesti on the coffee table. Rather than leaning straight back against the couch cushions, Tim’s angled himself a bit so that his good shoulder is pressed against Kon’s arm, his head fallen against Kon’s shoulder as laser-eyed velociraptors chase the Vikings on the screen.

It’s nice. It’s comfortable. He’s missed Tim; between Tim keeping himself busy as always, and Kon kinda taking a break from the Titans to hide in Smallville for a while, they haven’t gotten to hang out too much lately. It’s nice to sit together, to simply exist in the same space, no fighting and no danger and no adrenaline rush necessary.

To just … *breathe*.

Something explodes in the movie; Tim snorts against Kon’s shoulder and reaches for another handful of popcorn to cram into his mouth. “Wait, so why is ninja-cop fighting dinosaurs now?”

“Kung-fu cop,” Kon corrects. “And he’s in the past ‘cuz his buddy hacked the timestream. It’s like you’re not even paying attention to this piece of cinematic artistry.”

Tim glances up at him, wry; his hair is falling across his forehead, and without thinking, Kon lightly smooths it back from his face with a gentle brush of TTK, tucking it behind his ear. At this angle, Tim is looking up at him through his eyelashes; have they always been so long, or is Kon only now noticing?

The bluish light from the TV washes over Tim’s face, highlighting his cheekbones and the curve of his jaw. His thin lips, lightly curved into a smile as he keeps looking up at Kon. He never bothered to put a shirt back on after Kon patched him up, and his collarbones catch Kon’s gaze for a moment as the light plays across his skin. His wiry, muscled biceps are plainly visible; Kon’s eyes linger on his forearm for a moment too, watching the tendons in the back of his hand flex as he grabs another handful of popcorn.

Tim is kinda pretty, he thinks.

And immediately slams that thought to a screeching halt in its tracks. Where the fuck did *that* come from?

Like, yeah, it's normal for a guy to think his friends are handsome, sure. Everyone praises their homeboys, and like, nobody could give advice on "what outfit should I wear" or whatever if they couldn't tell if someone looks good, right? So that's normal.

But to think that Tim is *pretty?*

Pretty like how Kon thinks *Cassie* is pretty?

Not in the same ways—Tim's lost a lot of the baby fat in his cheeks, and his jaw is much more angular than Cassie's. He has a daintier, flatter nose than her, and thinner lips. Fuller, darker eyelashes, though, and sharper, more arched brows. He's not pretty in the same ways Cassie is, but he…

But he *is* pretty, Kon thinks, and a red-hot knife of guilt stabs through his gut.

What the fuck is wrong with him?

Is this some kind of weird—some kind of trauma response to dying? Did something get scrambled up in his head with those thousands of worlds colliding and then ripping apart right as he died? He's supposed to be—he's not—he *died* in Cassie's arms. He was a hero. He was a good boyfriend. He knew who he was. (Did he?) He did.

And now…

It all comes back to the same question he's asked the creaky farmhouse roof, on many a windy night.

Why did he have to come back?

The guilt-knife twists. How can he even think that? Right now, with the comfortable weight of Tim's head on his shoulder, the warmth of his body against his side—when he was just thinking of how devastatingly happy Tim is to see him, of how much Tim suffered under the weight of his grief. How can he even think something like that?

His TTK floats his can of Zesti over, and he takes a few sips, trying to

steady his thoughts. The last thing he wants is for Tim to notice.

It's fine. It's cool. He's chill. He's zen. He's cool! It's fine.

And for a few minutes, he really thinks he's gotten away with it. They keep watching the movie; some truly ridiculous nonsense happens every few minutes, and every time Tim laughs, Kon can feel his shoulder shake against him. It makes him want to drop his arm from the back of the cushions, to wrap it around Tim's shoulders instead—except that Tim's other shoulder is hurt, so maybe he ought to want to hold him by the waist instead, but that's *worse,* and that's *weirder,* and he can't think things like that, so he just—

He just doesn't.

He doesn't.

And then, just as a T-rex goes to fight the Nazi robot in the movie, Tim taps his long fingers against Kon's knee. A jolt of lightning zaps through Kon's body, but he ignores it.

"Hey," Tim murmurs. "How've you been doing, big guy?"

"What?" Kon blinks. "I'm good. Why?"

Tim tips his head back and pins him with a piercing look. It's not *as* piercing as Lois's staring-daggers-through-your-soul looks can get, but it's still up there.

"You've been avoiding everyone," Tim says. "Cassie I get, 'cuz, like, breakups are never fun. But Bart? Kory and Gar? Cass? And… me?"

"I saw Bart just the other day!" Kon objects. "We played video games and hung out for a while."

"He said that only happened 'cuz he invited himself over to see you." Tim pauses. "Not that I mean we've been, like, talking about you behind your back or anything, uh—that's not what I meant. I just asked because I haven't seen you around much lately, and I didn't know if that was a me thing, or…"

Oh. Kon could smack himself.

"No no no—it's not you, I swear!" He groans, squeezing his eyes shut, and turns his head to hide his face in Tim's hair. He smells of generic basic bitch men's shampoo. "I've just, uh… I've been staying in

Smallville mostly. Just… you know."

Tim hums softly, his hand still resting on Kon's knee. "Something on your mind?"

I keep wondering if I should have stayed dead. Also, something has been wrong with me since I came back, because I should be devastated about breaking up with Cassie, but all I feel is relief. Something is wrong with me, and I think I didn't come back right, and I don't know if I should've come back at all.

He can't say any of that. Not to Tim, who was so shattered by his grief that he tried to *clone him.* Just to have a little piece of him back. Even if he knew it wouldn't truly be Kon.

How could he possibly say any of this to Tim?

"Nothing, really," he says. The lie tastes like ashes on his tongue. "Just… adjusting, I guess. Lost a year. That's weird. Pa's dead. That's… I don't even know what to say."

For a moment, Tim is quiet. Then he shifts against Kon's side, dislodging him. He turns to look Kon dead in the eyes; one hand reaches up and tips Kon's chin up, resting against his cheek to prevent him from turning away. Kon resists the urge to squirm under his gaze.

"Dude," Tim says. "You and I both know if it was just adjustment and grief, you wouldn't be avoiding us." Another pause. He scrunches up his face a little. "I mean—adjustment and grief both are real and suck and they're totally valid reasons to be out of it, but that's—you're not…"

He trails off. Kon swallows hard and bites the inside of his lip. He *can't* tell Tim what's really eating at him, but his ability to read Tim is a two-way street. Tim knows how to read him, too.

Tim takes a breath. "You used to tell me just about everything."

Fuck.

"Tim, I'm not…" Kon scrubs a hand over his face. His heart pounds hard in his chest. He can't put this on Tim's shoulders. He *can't.* It would be so, so cruel to put that kind of fear in Tim's head, the idea that Kon might *want* to die again—he doesn't, he doesn't want to die again. He just—he just thinks maybe he should've stayed dead.

But he can't say that to Tim. He can't be that cruel. Not to Tim, who's already been through so much grief.

"There *is* something else bothering me," he admits, unable to meet Tim's gaze. "But I can't tell you. And that's—it's not your fault I can't tell you, it's *me,* I just—I can't, okay?"

Tim is quiet for a moment. Something explodes on the TV screen; the white light washes over his face as Kon peers at him through his fingers, heart racing with anxiety. He doesn't want Tim to think *he's* the problem—he just can't… he can't say it.

"Are you sure?" Tim asks, after a beat. "I know I'm… different. Not really the same guy I was when you died. If that's… if you need space to process that, and *that's* why—"

"It's *not!"*

That's—that's too much. Tim can't think that, Kon can't let him think that, that would never in a million years be the reason Kon can't tell him something and he needs to know!

Kon shoves the bowl of popcorn out of the way; his TTK is the only reason it doesn't go flying across the room and instead settles neatly onto the coffee table. He throws his arms around Tim's waist and hauls him into a hug, mindful of the gauze on his upper back as he clutches at him. He can hear the beating of Tim's heart, can feel it against his own chest; Tim's bare skin and his own are separated only by the thin layer of Kon's shirt, and he can feel the warmth of his body radiating through the fabric.

For an agonizing second, Tim is still, frozen in his arms. Then, like a spell has broken, he *melts,* slotting himself into Kon's chest like he was made to fit there; his cheek comes to rest against Kon's shoulder, nose brushing his neck, and his arms slip around Kon's waist in turn.

"I *swear,* Rob, it's not that," Kon manages. "I swear it's not. It's—it's something in my head. It's not you at all. You're—you're perfect, okay?" He can't fuck this up. He can't fuck this up and make Tim think he's the problem. He just—

He just *can't tell him.*

"Kon…" Tim takes a slow breath, blows it out as a deep, heavy sigh against his shoulder. Kon holds him a little tighter, helpless. After a moment, Tim nods slowly against him. "Okay. I believe you."

The relief is so poignant that Kon's stomach churns. Thank god. His shoulders slump with the weight of it; gratitude settles like snowfall on top.

Then Tim draws back, looks at him with those same piercing eyes. Like Kon is a puzzle that he needs to turn over and over in his hands until he figures out what makes him tick. "But you still can't tell me?"

Kon looks away. He misses Tim's warmth in his arms already. He doesn't want to think about what that might mean. "…No."

"Hmm." Tim taps a finger to his chin again, still scrutinizing him. "Can you at least tell me why you can't tell me?"

He's so determined to puzzle this out! And Kon can't tell him, he *can't* let Tim know what it is, and—fuck, he shouldn't have admitted something was eating at him at all. Should've just lied about that and pretended to be in such extreme denial that Tim just dropped it. But now he's already gone and put his foot in it, and Tim is—

God, he knows how much Tim hates not knowing things. Stupid, stupid, stupid, why did he admit to it?

Because Tim's turning him over like a puzzle in his fingers, and Kon is usually perfectly happy to be pliant and malleable in his hands but this time he's *not.* And he doesn't know what that's telling Tim, exactly, but he knows it's certainly telling him something, probably more than Kon would ever imagine.

And Tim can't know. He can't let Tim know.

"I don't want to talk about it, Tim," Kon says, stiff and awkward. The anxiety is back, his heart fluttering in his chest like the beating of a hummingbird's wings. What would Tim even say, if he found out? Would he be heartbroken? Furious? Terrified? All of the above? "I just —I don't."

Tim's eyes narrow slightly. Kon can practically see all the gears turning behind them. "You can't tell me why you can't tell me, either?"

God, he's like a dog with a fucking bone. Why did Kon not just divert away from this earlier? Why did he admit something was bothering him? Why is he so *stupid?*

"Rob, seriously," he tries again, shifting uncomfortably on the couch.

“Drop it, man.”

Tim purses his lips. “Kon, I’m just trying to help,” he says. “You came over to take care of *me*. And I’ve been worried about you. So won’t you just—I dunno, meet me halfway? I’m just trying to—”

“You don’t have to try and fix me!” Kon presses the heels of his hands to his eyes, nerves thrumming through his whole body. He wants to run away. “I’m *fine,* okay? Yeah, there’s some stuff I’m—working through, I guess, but it’s fine, none of it is a big deal, so—”

Idiot! Why did he just go and mention it again?

“I don’t buy that,” Tim says, pressing his lips together. “If it wasn’t a big deal, you wouldn’t be so resistant to talking about it.”

He’s—

Kon gapes for a second. He—he’s—

He’s *right,* but that makes it all the worse to hear. What the hell is he supposed to say to that?!

Tim can tell that he’s reeling, because of course he can; he keeps going, pressing his advantage. “If you can’t tell me, can you tell *anyone?* Because no offense, buddy, but you’re awful about actually reaching out to people when you need them, and I know you’re about to call me the pot calling the kettle black, but seriously.” He sighs, runs a hand through his hair. “Is the reason you can’t tell me that you just think I’ve gone through enough lately, and you… don’t wanna put more on me? Is that it?”

“No, it’s not!” Kon glares at him, heart in his throat and stomach tying itself into knots. He’s not even that close to the actual… the actual *thing,* the messy tangle of thoughts that Kon refuses to name, but he’s still getting close enough that Kon is suddenly terrified. “Stop trying to psychoanalyze me!”

“Sorry, no can do. I know you too well to stop,” Tim says. “You won’t tell me what it is, and you won’t tell me why you won’t tell me, so what can I do other than psychoanalyze you?”

He means it as a joke, and Kon knows that, but the idea of Tim prying him apart, slowly and methodically unfurling every layer Kon wraps around himself to hide, until he finds the ugly, twisted, bitter truth…

He can just imagine the way Tim's face would crumple. Can almost see the despair in his eyes, the horror and the denial and then the fury *—how dare you want to be dead again, how could you even think that, I* grieved *for you and you don't want to be here? Why would you think something like that? What's wrong with you? Are you so fundamentally broken?*

Why did they make you like this?

Numbness settles into the pit of his stomach. No, wait—that's dread, turning everything it touches to bitter ice.

Kon wrenches away from him and bolts to his feet, across the room at the balcony door in the blink of an eye. He's breathing hard.

Tim's head whips around. "Kon?" He reaches one hand out, eyes wide and contrite as he starts to get off the couch, but—

But Kon can't. He can't do this tonight. Tears burn behind his eyes.

"God, Tim! Why can't you ever just take 'no' for an answer?!" he demands, and flings himself into the dark, starless sky before Tim can even so much as blink.

Chapter End Notes

hi. this is my love letter to superboy comics. there are sooo many really good characters and relationships in there. superfam my absolute beloved there are characters/relationships tagged that haven't appeared yet, but rest assured that they will in the coming two chapters ♥

next chapter in a week, barring any unexpected delays!

Chapter 2: the night is darkest

Chapter Summary

> Kon runs away from his problems and makes some really great life choices that definitely will never come back to bite him in the ass! (Spoiler alert: They come back to bite him in the ass almost immediately.) But hey. Superman gives really, *really* good hugs.

Chapter Notes

> BIG warning this chapter!!! The previous ones (internalized homophobia, passive suicidality/suicidal ideation) still very much apply, but There's More.
>
> The biggest one is also kind of a spoiler for what happens in the first scene, so if you don't want to be spoiled on the specifics of Kon's incredibly unhealthy thought process, keep scrolling, but if you want the warnings please click below:
>
> Chapter Warnings (ITS A DOOZY IN HERE, FOLKS)!!!!
>
> - Casual sex as a form of self harm. (He does not realize it is self-harm.)
> - Semi-graphic mentions of past grooming and statutory rape.
> - Victim blaming (internalized, not from other characters).

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Music thrums through the air, loud enough Kon can feel the beat vibrating in his chest. Lights flash through the darkness, bold and colorful against all the bodies gyrating on the dance floor. Further from the entrance, the soft lights of the doorway to the lounge beckon anyone who needs a break from the pounding beats.

It's the perfect place to drown out his thoughts.

He didn't exactly mean to come to the Event Horizon; when he fled from Tim, he was more interested in just getting *away away away.* But he couldn't go back to the farm—not when that's exactly where he knows Tim would expect him to go—so his flight carried him up into the stars, far from home. All the way out here, to the moons of Mars.

The party's surprisingly close to Earth tonight. It's been a while since Kon's come here.

But now that he *is* here…

An idea occurs to him, followed by a zing of wild, fragile hope that ricochets through his chest. Maybe some of his other friends are here. Ones who never knew about any of… all that. Ones who won't *worry*. Hero, D.C., and Aura have all been on Earth a lot, so they… probably knew about his death, but still.

Hell, maybe he can—maybe if he can find Hero and Leander, he can ask Hero about, uh. About how he knew he was, like, uh…

Of course, he'll have to phrase it subtly. He can't let on that it's *himself* who's… uncertain. God, even the word *questioning* is too much; he can't even let himself think anything beyond that.

Anxiety thrums through his chest with the music. He caught himself, earlier. He thought that Tim was pretty, before he fucked everything up and ran away.

He thought that Tim was pretty.

If Kon knows anyone who'd understand why that's terrifying, it's Hero. How he knew about himself, how he was brave enough to come out to their whole team years ago, Kon will never quite be able to fathom, but god does he admire the sheer guts. Especially after D.C. took it so poorly.

God, fuck. Hero is gay, and Kon never thought any less of him for it. But the idea of Kon himself being—of Kon maybe being even slightly a little bit *maybe* … attracted to men…

Even *thinking* it directly is terrifying. He feels so—he's so… he's not supposed to do that. To be that way. He's supposed to be—he's supposed to be what everyone wants him to be. He's always liked girls, like he was *supposed to.* He died to save everyone, like he was always meant to! But this?

This isn't what he was ever made to be. And that terrifies him.

If it's even, like, real. He's still not convinced. Superman likes women—he's so in love with Lois, in a way Kon… has never been with anyone. He's supposed to be made in Superman's image, though. So maybe looking at Tim like that was just a… a fluke.

Maybe he's just going through some kind of delayed processing phase, or something, and he'll be desperately in love with Cassie again by

this time next month, just like he's supposed to be. Maybe something with all those worlds colliding right as he died just scrambled his head around, tugged at a piece of a Kon-El from a different universe who *is* allowed to be—to like guys.

Maybe he just came back wrong.

Kon takes a deep breath. He can't go back to Earth until he figures at least *something* out. He can't face Tim again until he gets a grip on himself. And he needs to get a grip fast, because he can't just leave things like this.

Okay. Okay. He's got a plan. Step one: he just needs to find Hero and Leander.

He squares his shoulders and sets off to the lounge to find Kindred Marx.

Marx, for his part, is amazed to see him. He actually drops the glass of… whatever that is in his hand (the four-armed alien behind him catches it before it can shatter), sitting upright in his chair. "Superboy? Is that really you?"

Kon raises a hand in a halfhearted wave. "In the flesh."

Marx's eyebrows shoot up. "I heard you died!"

Damn, that news made it all the way to the Event Horizon? Kon shrugs. "Well, yeah. But I got better."

"So you did," Marx observes, slowly settling back into his chair. "Good to see you around again. It's been quite a while!"

"It has," Kon agrees. "Listen—have you seen Hero or Leander around tonight? I was kinda hoping I'd find them here…"

"Nope." Marx shrugs languidly. "They were in a few nights back, but not right now. Why, did you need them for something?"

Certainly nothing that he's about to spill his guts to *Kindred Marx* of all people about. Kon shakes his head and shrugs it off as best he can. "Nah, I just haven't seen them in a while and was hoping to catch up if they were around tonight, that's all. Oh well. See you around, man."

Marx waves him off. "Sure, sure, go enjoy the party. Good to see you alive and kicking."

“Yeah, I’m sure it is,” Kon mutters, more to himself than anything. He sighs and turns back towards the dance floor, not wanting Marx to see his hesitation or disappointment.

So much for step one. Now what does he do with himself?

He’s not just gonna sit around and mope. He’s *Superboy*. He’s a hero who died saving the world, just like he was made to do. And no one likes a hero who can’t stop being a pathetic dud. Even if he is one on the inside, nobody has to see it.

He takes a breath. Runs a hand through his hair, a bit frazzled. He needs to get ahold of himself already. Sure, there’s something wrong with him and he doesn’t think he should’ve come back to begin with, but nobody who looks at him needs to know. Nobody *should* know. It’s not their problem. It’s nobody’s problem but his own.

He can’t just sit around and wallow and feel bad for himself. He needs to do something about… everything that’s wrong with him.

Okay. Kon takes another breath, blows it out, and squares his shoulders. He’s going to… he’s… okay, he’s not sure what exactly he’s going to do, but he’s gonna do *something*. Maybe, first of all, he can just… yeah! He can head over to the bar, get a fruity mocktail, and just enjoy the ambience a bit. Soak up the music and watch the dancing until he calms down a bit. Maybe after that he can figure out what he wants to say to Tim.

There. That’s a plan! He’s making progress. Moving forward. Whatever.

At least he’s here in casual clothes tonight, no blazing red crest of the house of El on his chest. He kind of doesn’t want to be *Superboy* right now. He wants to be no one, just another face in the crowd. The Event Horizon is good for that kind of thing.

He shoulders his way across the dance floor, slipping between the occasional gyrating bodies and waving limbs. The music pulses loud enough to vibrate into his chest, nearly loud enough to drown out all his thoughts. He’s going to figure it out, and everything will be fine.

It has to be fine.

There’s a couple of empty stools at the bar. Kon takes a seat at one, swinging his legs against the side. The bartender is busy with a group at the other end, but that’s okay; Kon takes a minute to simply

observe. The lights are a little brighter here than out on the dance floor, though not by a lot; they glimmer off the bottles of various kinds of intoxicants lining the shelves. Not all of them are familiar; Kon has a feeling even a Kryptonian might have some susceptibility to some of those kinds of liquors.

He's not interested in intoxication tonight, though. Probably. He needs to think, so his head needs to stay clear. He has a lot to figure out. Although he has to admit, getting himself to *stop* thinking for a little while sounds enticing. He's done basically nothing but think since he came back from the dead.

…Does he really have something to talk to Hero and Leander about? Or is it, uh… is he just making a mountain out of a molehill? Thinking Tim is pretty doesn't mean… Like, he doesn't need to freak out about it, does he? Tim isn't—Tim's pretty, but that doesn't need to mean anything.

And if thinking of Tim like that is still freaking him out, it… it doesn't have to. Right?

Aw, man, he's not fooling even himself like this. He really has got to try harder. Ugh. Maybe he's overreacting. Thinking Tim's pretty the same way Cassie is pretty doesn't have to mean anything. It's like thinking a painting is pretty, right? Or something like that?

Except he's definitely never actually wanted to kiss a painting.

Or Tim! He's never wanted to kiss Tim either! That's not a thought he's ever entertained, or *will* ever entertain, because… because… he can't. That's not allowed and he knows that. He can't. So he won't! He never has and he never will and he's definitely not thinking about it right now at all.

…He feels a little sick to his stomach now. Just *great*.

Luckily, the bartender comes over to take his mind off it before he can get too far into his freakout. Kon curls his fingers into his palm hard enough to dig his nails into his own skin and forces himself to breathe out.

"Hi there," the bartender greets. They're a Saturnian, by the look of it, older than Kon but not quite as old as Ma, with a warm demeanor. "What can I get for you, pal?"

Yeah. Okay. Thinking really isn't doing him any favors so far. What if

he just says *fuck it* and swings hard the other way?

There's a voice in the back of his head that's trying very hard to warn him that what he's about to do is a *really fucking stupid idea.* But Kon's always been a pretty fucking stupid kind of guy.

"You got anything that'd knock even Superman on his ass?" he asks.

The bartender's eyebrows shoot up. "Well, I'm not sure I've got anything quite *that* strong, but I'll see what I can whip up for you. Any species-related or other allergies or intolerances?"

Kon shakes his head. "Nah, I can handle anything." Except kryptonite, but that would make a stupid-ass cocktail ingredient. Only, like, Lex Luthor would do that. "Got a stomach of steel, here."

"Great." The bartender nods, then smiles sympathetically, turning to grab a glass from the rack. "Long day?"

"Yeah." Kon pastes on his sunniest fake grin. Tim would see right through it, but he doesn't want to think about Tim anymore. Not until he's figured it all out. And hey, maybe doing something monumentally stupid will help him figure it out! "I just wanna loosen up and get my mind off it, y'know?"

An understanding hum. "Sorry to hear it. But I think I've got just the thing for you."

He watches them pour a few liquids from this bottle and that, layering the cocktail into something that looks almost like a watercolor painting. The top is a fruity red, which fades into a layer of warm gold that glimmers in the low light; under that is a shock of electric blue that might be actually glowing. The very bottom is pitch black.

"It's an Event Horizon special house cocktail," the bartender proclaims, topping it with a straw, a little sparkler, and a decorative piece of sugar candy. "I call it the Singularity. Not for the faint of heart!"

Kon takes an experimental sip. It's fiery and sweet, and burns on its way down his throat, all the way down into his chest.

"Thanks," he says, and fires a two-fingered salute to the bartender. "It's perfect."

He sits, soaks up the music, and sips. Watches people dance, while the

warm, tingly buzz from the cocktail spreads through his body. Even strong as it is, it's not enough to actually get him drunk—damn Kryptonian metabolism, huh?—but he'd guess the feeling is close to what Cassie's described as being buzzed, maybe tipsy.

Someone slides onto the stool next to him. Tall, about Kon's own height, with broad shoulders and a lithe frame. They give him an obvious once-over and smile warmly. "What's a pretty guy like you doing all alone in the corner?"

Pretty? Ha, that's a new one. Kon's used to being described as *hot* or *handsome,* maybe called a stud here or there. Pretty doesn't really suit him, but… it feels nice. And it's flattering that a stranger would come up to him just to say so.

…A stranger who looks to be a guy. And who's flirting with him.

Kon has never flirted with guys before. Girls, plenty, sure, but…

"Uh."

Shit, what is he supposed to say? That he's flattered, but he's straight? He doesn't even know if he is. How's he supposed to—

Oh. Wait a second.

What better way to figure out if he's actually into guys than… by trying it out? There's a guy here who's expressed some degree of interest in him. It's the perfect setup, because he's a stranger. If it goes south and gets too awkward, Kon can flee without worrying about loose ends or hurt feelings. It's casual. Easy. Free.

So he pulls out another *Kona-TV*-worthy dazzling grin and answers, "Waiting for a nice dude like you to come say hi."

The stranger's smile grows. Kon's heart pounds.

They dance for a bit. It's even fun, losing himself in the pounding bass and the faceless crowd. He burns through whatever tipsy buzz the drink gave him as they gyrate on the dance floor, laughing to the beat. Over the noise, he learns that the stranger is a spacefarer, part human and part Daxamite. He lies, says he's also of Daxamite descent, because identifying himself as Kryptonian would be a dead ringer for who he *is,* and that's the last thing he wants, but even though he's gotten used to lies over the years, it still tastes like ash on his tongue.

When they stumble to a dark, secluded corner, hands fumbling all over each other, Kon lets him kiss him. He even kisses back, slips his arms around the other man's waist, and leans into him. It doesn't feel particularly different from kissing Cassie, but it's kind of nice to feel wanted.

So when the spacefarer's hand curves against his jaw, when his kiss-swollen lips brush his ear and whisper a suggestion, Kon nods, heart thundering in his chest, and sinks to his knees.

He's never sucked off another man before. Never actually gone down on anyone—when he and Cassie slept together, it was just plain, simple missionary, neither of them sure what to do but terrified of the days to come. Before that was Kay, who pushed him down on the sand and reached between his legs, laughing, and told him exactly what she wanted him to do with his fingers, his TTK, his dick.

This is different. He experiments a little, licks this way, bobs his head like that. The other man's fingers curl into his hair as he rocks his hips against Kon's mouth, murmurs barely-audible words of encouragement that blend into the pounding music. The taste is a little weird, but not *bad.* He's not used to it.

But he can't have done too bad of a job, because the spacefarer moans, his fingers curled into a fist in Kon's hair—with part-Daxamite strength, Kon can even feel the tug—and comes, a wet mess in Kon's mouth. Kon nearly chokes on it, gags and sputters, but forces himself to swallow. Something feels heavy, cloying, and thick in the pit of his stomach.

It doesn't matter, though, because the stranger sinks to his knees, too, kisses Kon again and tells him he did good, and the praise soaks into his skin. He slumps against his shoulder and lets him reach for the button on his jeans, lets him reach into his boxers and take him in hand, and—

Something beeps, *loud.* The spacefarer jerks in alarm, swearing under his breath.

"I'm so sorry, babe," he says, pulling away and clambering to his feet. "That's my crew, I have to go right now, it's some kind of emergency, I'm *so* sorry. This was nice, though, I hope I'll see you around so I can make it up to you—"

"Yeah," Kon mumbles, dazed. He doesn't watch him leave.

Kissing Cassie wasn't any worse than kissing some random man. It was nice, to be kissed, to be held, to be wanted, but that same awful, vaguely nauseous feeling still rises in his chest and throat the more he thinks about it.

He should stop thinking about it.

He slumps back against the wall, closing his eyes. Maybe he'll just sit here for a moment and not think at all. He's more confused than ever, and only now does it hit him that even with the man's dick in his mouth, Kon never actually found out his name.

"Yo, Kon, is that you?"

Kon lifts his head, a little dazed. His entire skull feels like it's stuffed with cotton, and everything is happening at a great distance. Blinking, he does his best to force his eyes to focus on the face in front of him. Long, dark hair framing a black-and-purple mask, and a ridiculously revealing crop top, and…

Kon. She called him Kon. Fuck, he's been recognized?

Wait. But that's—

Kon squints, confused. "Aura?"

"Oh, jeez." Aura squats next to him, an uncharacteristic look of concern on her face. "Are you, like, good?"

Kon takes stock of himself. He's… still on the floor in the same spot as he was before, and if he was human, or under a red sun, he suspects his back and neck would be loudly protesting. How long has it been since he moved? Weird.

…So maybe "just stop thinking for a while" wasn't the best move he could've made here.

His eyes suddenly sting and burn, and a huge lump crawls up his throat. The sorrow that overcame him the other morning with Krypto is back in the pit of his stomach, heavy and inescapable, and he's going to drown in it.

Tears welling up in his eyes, he looks up at Aura. "Th-there's something wrong with me," he blubbers. God, he's so *pathetic* right now, what's wrong with him? He's not supposed to admit it, not to

her, not to anyone! “I—I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have—I shouldn’t—”

Aura looks alarmed. Great. Just what he needed: he’s freaking her out. She purses her lips, then awkwardly reaches over and pats his shoulder. “Uh… there, there?”

…Oh, she’s *terrible* at this. Kon almost laughs. He scrubs a hand over his eyes instead, swallowing the tears back down. He’s a hero. He’s *Superboy*. He’s not supposed to break down like this.

“Sorry,” he says again, a little less watery this time. “I’m, uh. I… I’m just… kind of a mess right now.”

“Yeah, no shit.” Aura hesitates for a second, then sits down on the floor next to him, cross-legged. “Uh… do you wanna… you know. Talk about it?”

She sounds like she’s pulling teeth. Kon shakes his head. “It’s—it’s not your problem to fix.”

Aura sucks in a breath and blows it out between her teeth. She worries at the hem of her shirt with two fingers for a second, staring at him, and then finally says, “Did someone assault you?”

Kon’s thoughts grind to a halt. “What?”

Aura looks away. “I’m just saying, you’re, like—totally spaced out, sitting off in a corner, there’s dried jizz on your chin, and your pants are open. Doesn’t paint a great picture, man.”

There’s—

Horrified, Kon scrubs his sleeve over his face. “Did I get it?”

Aura’s lips twist. “Hold on,” she says, and stands, disappearing into the crowd. Kon could follow her footsteps with his superhearing, if he wanted to, but picking them out of all the music and noise seems like a lot of pointless effort. He just sighs, buttons up his jeans, and drops his head back against the wall again.

But Aura comes back quickly, dropping to her knees next to him. She cups his chin in one firm hand and scrubs at his chin with a wet napkin. She isn’t gentle; she’s never gentle, but her brusqueness doesn’t hurt. When she’s satisfied, she sits back on her heels, wads the napkin up, and tosses it over her shoulder.

“Shouldn’t you find a trash can?” Kon objects weakly.

Aura rolls her eyes. “Marx can get it.” She tosses her hair over her shoulder, too. “Now. Are you gonna tell me if you, uh…” She trails off again, then frowns. “Actually, forget it. Who should I call for you?”

“What?” Kon blinks through the foggy haze in his head again. “No, that’s not—I wasn’t—I didn’t get—I wanted…”

Oh, fuck. If he admits to her it was consensual, then he has to admit he willingly got on his knees and opened his mouth for another man’s dick.

Hot, salty tears well up in his eyes again, alarmingly fast, and spill over before he can stop them. Kon wraps his arms around himself and looks up at Aura again, terrified. He’s on the edge of a precipice, and for the first time in his life, he’s afraid of falling.

“I…”

For once, Aura doesn’t rush him. She just stares at his face and waits.

Kon scrubs a hand over his face again, brushing away the tears as best as he can. “I’m—I don’t know if—” He takes a shaky breath. It’s a little easier to say it if he doesn’t look at her. “I’m not gay.”

“Uh… okay,” Aura says. “Congratulations? On not being gay?”

Kon’s face heats with shame. More tears spill over. “Something is *wrong* with me,” he insists, digging his fingers into the leather of his jacket. “I’m—I thought—I thought if I was gay, I’d know if I just—but I’m so *confused,* and…”

Something close to understanding passes over Aura’s face. “Oh, *jeez,”* she mutters, but it looks like she’s starting to get it.

Which is, naturally, why Kon has to go and ruin it with what he says next: “And I’m pretty sure I’m supposed to have stayed dead, but I can’t—nobody wants to hear that.”

“Oh, Jesus fucking Christ.” Aura blows out a breath. “You’re going the fuck through it, huh?”

Kon lets out a watery, pathetic laugh. “Yeah,” he admits. It feels a little bit like a weight off his chest to admit it out loud. “I think I came back wrong. I don’t know. My head’s…” More tears spill over, and he

chokes on a tiny sob. “I was supposed to be like Superman, y’know? But *he* didn’t keep thinking he shoulda stayed dead after he came back. He knew he couldn’t do that to anyone he loved again. I’m a selfish dickwad, aren’t I?”

“Jesus fucking *Christ,”* Aura repeats. She rakes her hand through her hair, agitated, and punches his shoulder. “You’re nowhere near a selfish dickwad, idiot. I am. You literally died to save the goddamn world! That’s as selfless as it fucking gets.”

Kon shakes his head. She doesn’t get it. That’s what he was made for. He was made to be a hero. And heroes sacrifice themselves when the world needs them to. That’s what he was made for. He’s always known that.

But Aura just holds out her hand, imperious. “Give me your phone,” she says. “I’m calling Superman.”

“Why?” Kon asks. He still feels floaty and distant and exhausted. But alarm worms its way in there, after a moment. “…Don’t tell him I sucked dick on purpose. Please?”

Aura looks surprised for a second. “Would he be weird about that?”

Yes. No. He’d be understanding, which would be unbearable. Kon can’t take it. “I don’t know.”

“Whatever.” Aura flexes her fingers for emphasis. “Not my business to out you anyway. I just want him to get you home safe, stupid.”

“Oh,” Kon says. “I can get home myself.”

“Uh, no, I don’t think you can right now.” Aura gives him an impatient look. “Phone. Now. Don’t make me get it myself.”

Kon has to take a second to remember how to move his fingers with any sort of dexterity again, but he fishes his phone out of his pocket. Takes a second to glance at it himself. He’s got a bunch of messages from Tim, but none of the energy to read any of them; he just marks them read without looking to clear his notifications, then meekly hands the phone to Aura.

“He’s listed as ‘Superdude’, with the little trademark symbol,” he tells her, dropping his head back against the wall and closing his eyes the second she takes it. “…I’m tired.”

“Yeah, I’ll bet you are.” After a second, he hears the *click* of her nails tapping on the screen, and then under the music, the dial tone ringing. Anxiety thrums in his stomach, but it’s easy to ignore with all the foggy, floaty feelings in his head. He doesn’t want Kal to see him like this, but it doesn’t really matter.

He doesn’t hear what Aura says to Kal, or what Kal says back. He just drifts, hazy and exhausted. It’s a pretty short conversation, and then his phone tucks itself back into his jacket pocket. Aura uses her metallokinesis to give it back, instead of touching him. He’s not sure if he’s grateful or ashamed.

The snap of fingers in front of his nose jerks his attention back into reality. Aura clicks her tongue. “Alright, now don’t go passing out on me before Big Blue gets here.”

“Not passing out,” Kon mumbles. “Just… tired.” He bites the inside of his cheek. “…Sorry for the trouble, Aura.”

Aura huffs. “Oh my god, shut *up* with the apologies already!”

Kon winces. “Sorry. Wait—no, shit, sorry—no! Fuck. I’m so bad at this, I’m sor—no! I can’t…”

But at least his stupidity makes her laugh, so that’s something. She shakes her head, tossing her hair over her shoulder, and leans against the wall next to him. “You’re ridiculous.”

Normally, he’d grin at her and joke, *And that’s why you love me,* just to get her all flustered and in denial of their years of friendship. But he can’t summon up the energy to smile even a little bit, forget joking around. His head is stuffed full of cotton and fog, and his mouth still tastes like dick.

He sniffles again. He wants to go *home.* He wants…

“Hey.” Aura hesitates for a second, then takes the plunge. “You know there’s nothing wrong with you for being gay, if you are. Right?”

Kon comes very, very close to bursting into tears again. How can she just say it so easily like that? He can barely put it in words in his own mind without wanting to throw up. “I—I’m not—”

Aura sighs. “Yeah, okay, denial’s fine, too.”

But Kon shakes his head. “S’not that. I’m—I’m not *supposed* to be. And

I'm not even g-good at it—"

He has to break off to wipe his eyes again, humiliated. He's a bad ex-boyfriend. He's supposed to be miserable without Cassie, and instead he's squandering the relief he felt on giving stupid alien blowjobs that he didn't even particularly enjoy. Why did it not feel like something special, something new, something he was supposed to do? Why can't he even do *this* right?

Aura *snorts.* That gets him out of his head again in disbelief.

"Kon," she says, rolling her eyes. "You're *way* too much of a softie to like one-night stands. *Obviously* a quickie with a stranger isn't your thing. You're a fucking marshmallow, dumbass. Why didn't you start with, like, going on a date with a guy instead?"

"That's—" Kon breaks off, voice choked.

That's utterly terrifying. That makes it so much realer than a one-and-done deal with a stranger that he could just repress and pretend never happened.

…But it's also true. He's never really liked flings. He's only dated three people in his life: Kay, Tana, and Cassie. And he poured as much of himself as he could possibly give into each one of those relationships, for all the good it did him.

"I'm not a marshmallow," he finally mumbles, voice small.

Aura rolls her eyes again. "I could literally skewer you and roast you over a fire."

"No, you couldn't." Kon wraps his arms around himself and tries really hard not to pout. This is safer ground, at least; it's a lot easier to retreat to a silly yes-and-no argument over nothing, than to admit she had a point. "I'm invulnerable."

Aura opens her mouth, a funny look on her face. Pauses. Closes it again. But the damage is done; Kon knows what she didn't say.

Not invulnerable enough.

He winces.

It's kind of funny. He came here, running away from Earth to escape his problems, and yet they followed him. What's a guy to do when

he's haunted by his own ghost?

"Sorry," Aura mutters, looking away. "I didn't say it."

"S'fine." Kon looks away, too. "Not like it's not true."

Aura sucks in a breath. Hesitates for a second. Then she punches his shoulder. "Fine. Then I really could just skewer you, roast you over a fire, then sandwich you between chocolate and graham crackers and bite you in half. You stupid goddamn marshmallow."

"Please don't," Kal says, and both of them jump.

For such a big dude, Kal is remarkably good at going unnoticed when he wants to. Here, amid all the pounding music and pulsing lights, it's no wonder he snuck up on them. Kon stares up at him for a moment, heart thundering in his chest. How much did he hear? Was he paying attention to their conversation from across the room? Did he… did he…

He's in casual clothes, so presumably Aura told him Kon's here as just another faceless stranger in the crowd, not wanting to be recognized. Or maybe she just told him not to cause a ruckus the way *Superman* showing up here undoubtedly would. Or maybe he just figured that out on his own.

Either way, he's wearing his glasses and a simple tee with a plaid flannel tied around his waist, looking for all the world like he just came right off the farm. He smiles down at them both, though Kon can see the concern in his eyes.

"Thank you," he tells Aura first, "for calling me. I appreciate it."

"Uh, yeah, whatever," Aura says, folding her arms over her chest. "This chump was all… you know."

Sweet of her not to say he was blubbering all over the place and that she just wanted to push him off onto someone else. Kon appreciates that. She might be allergic to emotions, but she wouldn't intentionally kick him while he's down. And, like she said, she doesn't say a word about him being gay.

"Yes, I appreciate you looking out for him." Kal smiles at her, then turns to Kon, kneeling on the kinda-sticky floor without a care in the world. He offers his hand. "C'mon, son. Let's get you home."

Kon stares at him for a few seconds. His heartbeat is steady and calm, a soothing rhythm under all the noise.

He takes his hand. Kal helps him to his feet.

“Bye, Aura,” he mumbles, almost as an afterthought. “See you ‘round.”

“Yeah, sure.” Aura waves him off. “Next time you better actually be taking care of yourself. Don’t make me do it for you again, dipshit.”

Kon almost smiles. “I’ll try.”

Kal leads him away from the heavy music and stifling atmosphere. Hand-in-hand, they take flight; Kal takes the lead, and Kon gratefully, shamefully lets him, retreating back into the fog in his head. The chill of space, at least, helps cut through it a little, and by the time they start to descend back into Earth’s atmosphere, he feels enough like himself again that the weight of humiliation settles into his bones.

Kal turns them towards the heartland, and shame spears through Kon’s stomach. It’s already well past dawn and into the morning. He knew he went to see Tim pretty late, after Tim got back from patrol and called him, but to think he was at the Event Horizon *all night?*

“No,” he says, shaking his head. “I—I don’t want Ma seeing me like this, Kal, somewhere else, please—”

Kal slows in midair, turns to look at him with concern. “Ma would never judge you for having a rough night, Kon. You know that.”

“I’m judging me,” Kon says fiercely, something inside him cracking. “*Please*, Kal.”

Kal softens, like he always does. Just like Ma would, except Ma’s worse. “Of course. Is my place okay? Lois is home, but Kara’s taking Jon and Chris out for a morning matinee movie and then to the arcade, so they won’t be back for a while.”

Lois, Kon can handle. She won’t look at him with that same gentle, sorrowful understanding like Ma. She’s made of too many sharp edges for that. “Yeah,” he says, relief only fueling the shame in his gut. “That’s fine.”

“Alright.” Kal squeezes his hand. “C’mon, then.”

He leads Kon to the familiar outlines of his Metropolis neighborhood,

fast enough that cameras won't catch them slipping in through the rooftop stairwell door and down into the apartment building. The world catches up with a rush as they slow down to normal, human speeds, and Kon sways on his feet.

Kal steadies him with an arm around his shoulders, concern radiating from him in waves despite how gentle he's trying to be. Like Kon's a skittish animal back on the farm.

"Steady there, Kon," he says, his voice soft. "We're nearly home."

"Yeah," Kon mumbles.

Why is he so out of sorts? It's embarrassing, the way he keeps making Kal take care of him in the most basic ways.

Kal keeps the apartment as neat and tidy as one can, with Chris and Jon running around in it all the time. Normally, it's a cozy place, a little slice of home even in the big city, but right now, Kon shrinks in on himself as he toes off his shoes at the front door. Shame creeps up from the pit of his stomach into his ribs, his chest, his throat. Lois is in her study, the door closed; he can hear furious typing from the other side, but it pauses at the sound of Kal's voice.

"Why don't you sit down?" Kal gently nudges him towards the couch. "I'll make some tea. Does that sound good?"

One of Chris's jackets and, for some reason, a single one of Jon's socks, are draped over the back of the couch. Kon freezes as he catches sight of them. He doesn't deserve to touch them, not like this. He feels… he feels…

He feels *dirty*.

"Actually, can I…" He swallows hard. "Can I get a shower first?"

"Of course!"

Kal guides him to the bathroom with a hand on his elbow, like he's not sure if Kon remembers his way around the apartment. He pauses at the door, rubbing the back of his neck ruefully.

"Though I think the boys may have raided the shirts you left here, and I haven't done laundry yet this weekend, sorry. Go on and hop in, and I'll get you something to borrow."

It's not lost on him that Kal brought him to the bathroom attached to his and Lois's bedroom, not the one the boys share. Like he knows Kon might break down seeing more marks of his baby brothers while wallowing in his own shame, or else maybe that he just thinks Kon needs the extra privacy.

Kal is being so gentle with him that Kon kind of wants to throw up. He doesn't deserve this, he's a fucking idiot who deserves every ounce of the lecture he's not getting, and he doesn't—he doesn't—

Of course he understands it. Kal is kind. He's *Superman.* Of course he's always kind. But Kon…

Kon is a wreck, and Kal is going to ask him what's wrong, and he's going to spill his messy, twisted guts all over this tidy apartment.

"Thanks, Kal," he manages, and slips into the shower.

The hot water helps him clear his head at least a little. It provides a drum of white noise, pounding on his back as he scrubs himself raw, furious with despair. What is he doing here? Why does he still not know what's *wrong* with him? He thought—he thought he'd at least understand, if he… if he jumped right into the deep end and *experienced* it, in a way he could still run away from, but he's more confused than ever.

He didn't *hate* it. He didn't love it, either. All he is now is soiled, guilty, and ashamed.

He shuts off the water.

Kal's laid out a T-shirt, a big, soft Daily Planet hoodie, and black sweatpants for him. Kon appreciates the full body coverage, the shapelessness of it all. He pauses as he picks up the shirt. Stares at himself in the mirror, naked, for a minute.

The man gazing back has a sharp, chiseled square jaw, sopping curls forming in his short hair. He needs to cut it again to keep it looking normal, rather than stupid and wild like he used to wear it as a freshly-hatched idiot, but he doesn't really care enough these days. He's tall and broad, his eyes bright. He's muscular, but soft, too, in all the right places. He's handsome enough. Plenty of people say so. But none of that is what really makes him want to cry.

It's that even now, the man in the mirror still looks like Superman.

Exhaustion assails him as he gets dressed, all his sleepless nights catching up to him all at once. His head pounds as he pulls on the hoodie, his vision swimming as he leaves the bathroom and stands, swaying, in the middle of the bedroom. Great.

Surely Kal won't mind if he just… lies down for a minute.

Kon all but collapses on the edge of the bed. His limbs are leaden, his eyes sore; he still wants to cry, but he's too tired. He just curls up, squeezes his eyes shut, and tells himself he'll get up in a second.

Just a second.

"…don't know what happened," a soft voice says. "I mean, of course he's been struggling. But something must have pushed him past the tipping point yesterday. I just wish I knew how to help."

A warm lump leans against Kon's back, rising and falling slowly. It takes several seconds for him to realize it's Krypto, quietly snoring. There's a blanket over him that wasn't there when he fell asleep, but he's grateful; it's cozy.

"Just be there for him," another voice says, also soft. "He thinks the world of you, Clark. Just let him know you care, and *talk* to him. He's been isolating himself. If he's anything like you," and here, a wry snort, "he's hurting, and he doesn't want to burden anyone. *That's* probably what did it."

Kon's stomach drops as he wakes up a little more. They're… talking about him, aren't they? Kal and Lois, in the other room. Shit.

A sigh. "You're right, as usual." A soft sound that might be a kiss. "I think he's starting to wake up. Should I put on some tea? Or maybe I should wait; I don't know if he wants any…"

Kon stiffens, then forces himself to relax. Focuses on breathing with Krypto, slow and deep.

"Wait for him to actually wake up, then just ask him." Lois advises. "Making tea doesn't take long, Smallville. You're fretting."

Kal sighs. "I'm fretting," he agrees. "I just… I'm worried about him."

Fuck. That's the last thing Kon wants. Except that it's also *exactly* what he wants. A wave of familiar guilt rises up in his stomach, and he

swallows down a sigh. He's so tired of feeling guilty.

“I know you are,” Lois says gently. “We all are. It’s never easy to see someone you love hurting.”

Someone you love. Because they both love him.

Ma loves him. Bart loves him. Aura loves him, even if she’d rather stick her hand in boiling water than admit it. Chris and Jon love him. Krypto loves him. Simon, Lori, and Sajan love him.

Tim loves him.

Cassie loves—

Chest suddenly painfully tight, Kon sniffles. Out of nowhere, he misses Roxy so much it *hurts*—

He chokes on a sob and buries his face in his hands. So much for pretending to be asleep. But he doesn’t even care that much right now, because he’s just—he’s just—everything is swirling together into a maelstrom in his head, and he’s so damn tired. He’s tired, and it just keeps going, and he should be dead but he isn’t, and something (everything) is wrong with him.

He should be dead. He should be dead. He should be dead, he should be dead, he should be dead!

Why isn’t he dead?!

And then there’s a rush of air, a blur of color, and…

“Oh, *Kon.”*

Kal is suddenly right there, kneeling at the bedside in front of him. Krypto butts his head into Kon’s back, worried; his tail thumps against Kon’s hip as he paws at his shoulder. Kon shudders, his shame drowning in all this sorrow he can’t explain, and sobs harder.

Kal rests a hand on his shoulder. “Kon, come here. It’s alright, son. It’s alright. Let it out.”

“Kal,” Kon sobs. He tries to sit up, scrubs at his face, but the tears keep welling up and falling down his cheeks no matter how hard he tries to swallow them down. The sorrow in his chest is so all-encompassing he’s going to drown in it. “Kal, I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m *sorry—”*

Kal pulls him into his arms.

No one gives a hug like Superman does. He holds Kon tight, the way only someone else with superstrength really can. Kon may have shot up in the months before his death, but he's still not as tall or broad as Kal, and when Kal sweeps him into his arms like this, he feels tiny. Like the little kid he never got to be, curled up somewhere safe. He sobs harder.

"You have nothing to apologize for. Absolutely nothing." Kal rubs his back, big, slow arcs. Kon hiccups and clutches at his shirt, bawling. "There you are, darling. Let it out. Let it all out."

Time trickles by, maybe five minutes, maybe an hour. Kon cries himself out until there's no tears left in him, and Kal holds him fast the entire time. He's warm, and his heartbeat is strong, steady, and soothing. It helps stave off the sadness, just a little.

Finally cried out, Kon sniffles pathetically into the silence. Krypto is a warm lump against his back and legs, and he feels… maybe a tiny bit better. Maybe. Mostly, he just feels tired.

Kal gently tips his chin up with one hand, using his sleeve to wipe Kon's cheeks. There's a gross, wet spot on his shoulder. Kon's face heats with shame, but Kal doesn't seem to care.

"There you are," Kal says, and smiles at him, gentle and warm. "How do you feel?"

Kon sniffles again. "…Li'l better," he mumbles. "Sorry."

"You have nothing to be sorry for." Kal squeezes his shoulder. "It's alright."

"Got your shirt all gross," Kon objects. Sniffles again. Ugh. He feels icky and numb and just… bleh. All wrung out, like a limp rag.

Kal shrugs. "It's just a shirt," he says, not unreasonably. "You're far more important, and besides. I own a washing machine. And other shirts." He squeezes Kon's shoulder again. "You're okay, son. Take a deep breath."

Kon takes a deep breath. Blows it out, slowly. Wipes a hand over his eyes again and sighs. This is a little awkward. What's he supposed to do with himself now?

“Good.” Kal gives him an encouraging smile. It turns a little wry after a moment, and he tilts his head. “D’you want some tea?”

Kon almost laughs. If he was a little less numb and empty, he would. As it is, he can’t quite bring himself to even smile—funny, right? He used to be so good at putting on a smile for all the cameras. Tana used to say—

He can’t think about Tana right now.

He sniffles again. “I, um. Yeah. Do you, um… do you have that cinnamon apple chai Ma likes in wintertime?”

Kal softens even more, somehow. He gets to his feet, but lingers by the bedside, his hand still resting on Kon’s shoulder. “Of course I do. I’ll go put on some water while you wash your face. How’s that sound?”

“Good,” Kon mumbles. Washing his face sounds like a good idea. He hates feeling all sticky from drying tears.

Before he leaves, Kal pulls him into another hug, squeezes him close, and stays just like that, for several heartbeats. Kon leans into him and closes his sore eyes. His shirt smells of fresh linen laundry detergent. In his arms, Kon feels so safe.

“You’re gonna be okay, Kon,” he murmurs, and drops a kiss to the top of his head. “You’ll be okay.”

Kon nearly bursts into tears again, but valiantly swallows them down. He’s not so sure about that, but it’s hard not to believe Kal when he says it like that. “…Okay.”

When he makes his way to the living room, freshened up but still uncertain and hesitant and still so very ashamed, Kal is in the kitchen, stirring sugar into three steaming mugs. The spoon in his hand seems incongruously small and fragile as it clinks against the porcelain.

Lois, meanwhile, is on the sofa, waiting. Her gaze snaps to Kon as he appears in the doorway, and he shrinks back a little automatically; Krypto presses against his legs reassuringly, and his chest tightens. His dog *loves* him.

“C’mere, squirt,” Lois says, her voice surprisingly gentle. She pats the cushion next to her with a tiny smile. “Sit.”

Kon shuffles over and sits. “…Sorry for interrupting your work day,”

he mumbles, staring at a speck of fuzz on his knee. Krypto settles down on top of his feet. “I know you’re pretty busy and stuff.”

Lois reaches over and cups his chin, turns his head so that he has to look at her. It still takes him a moment to actually drag his gaze up to her face, but when he does, he… doesn’t see judgment. Just compassion.

“If I really wanted to,” she says, “I could have just stayed in my office with the door shut. I’m not too busy for you, kiddo.”

“Oh,” Kon says, and looks down again. “Right. Okay.”

Lois’s hand settles on his shoulder and squeezes. Kon chews at his lower lip and stares at the soft rise and fall of Krypto’s furry sides as he breathes.

“What happened?” Lois asks, her voice strangely gentle. Kon’s used to her being acerbic, witty, and sharp, not… this. “C’mon. Lay it on us, squirt.”

Kal lets out a soft noise of protest as he brings the tea tray to the table. “Lois, if he doesn’t want to talk about it, don’t pry.”

“I know how to wrangle you Kent boys,” Lois shoots back. “Sometimes, you need a bit of prying.”

Ouch. That’s uncomfortably close to what Tim said last night, too.

Kon accepts the mug Kal hands him with a murmur of thanks. Heat seeps into his palms as he wraps his hands around it; and he lets out a soft breath. It’s surprisingly comforting, and he’s grateful for the excuse not to look at Lois right this second.

He takes a breath as Kal settles down on his other side, a solid wall of comfort and safety. That helps a little, but Kon still doesn’t know what to say. “I…”

The worst part of talking to Kal and Lois is that when he trails off, they both simply wait for him to find the right words. Damn reporters —they’re comfortable with silence, and they know how to get people talking.

The thing is, Kon *can’t* just say he’s fine. They already know that’s a lie. Even if he didn’t just spend like thirty minutes bawling on Kal’s shoulder, he still made Kal have to go to the Event Horizon to come

get him, ‘cuz he was too fucked up to get home on his own.

But just because he knows what he can’t say doesn’t mean he knows what he *can.*

His fingers tighten around the mug. “I… I don’t…”

“You can talk to us, kiddo.” Lois squeezes his shoulder again. “Let me guess. You’re worried about being a burden with your problems?”

Kon hunches in on himself a little, shame spiking in his stomach. “I—it’s not—”

“Kon,” Kal murmurs, resting one big, warm hand atop his head like he’s a little kid. “It’s okay.”

“I’m scared,” Kon blurts out, and flinches. Why did he say that?

Ha. Some hero he is, right?

But instead of pouncing on him like Tim did last night, Kal and Lois both just soften. They exchange glances over his head, and then Lois leans in and gives him a gentle hug, resting her chin on his shoulder. She’s so much smaller and more delicate than him, but somehow, in her arms, he feels secure.

“You’re safe with us,” she promises. “Whatever you say won’t leave this room unless you want it to. And I promise we won’t judge you for it.”

They might. Kon’s an idiot who went and sucked a random stranger’s dick last night to try and figure out if he’s gay, but it didn’t help, and he’s more confused than ever. That’s pretty stupid. Worth judging him for. He’s judging himself for it.

Is he just—broken somehow? Sex with Kay was more stressful than fun, sex with Cassie was—it was just because they were scared of tomorrow, and they were right to be, because when it came, Kon died. And now this.

Aura said he’s just not built for casual stuff. But what if she was wrong, and Kon’s just… made wrong?

God, this is why he should have stayed dead—

“Kon.” Lois’s hand cradles his cheek. “What are you thinking?”

Kon shakes his head a little and drops his gaze to Krypto's fur again. Krypto is a warm, soothing lump against his legs. Kon loves him.

"I… had a fight with Tim last night," Kon finally admits, staring at Krypto's ears. One of them twitches. "And then I ran away."

Kal makes a soft sound of understanding. "That's why you went to the Event Horizon instead of the farm?"

Kon nods miserably.

"Okay." Lois rests her hand on his shoulder again. Kon is grateful for the point of contact; it's not so overbearing as to make him feel trapped, but it's comforting. "What about?"

He bites the inside of his lip. He ought to keep it in, but he's so *tired.* It's like he cried out all his inhibitions onto Kal's shoulder, and now he's just left with exhaustion and needy, pathetic sadness.

"The… stuff," he says, lamely. "Tim—he said he can tell I've been… you know." He flaps a hand vaguely at nothing. "Out of it. Um. Unhappy. But I didn't wanna talk about it, and he wouldn't take no for an answer, and I—"

Shame curdles in his stomach, and tears prickle at his eyes again. God, he was such an *ass* last night.

"I freaked out at him and ran away," he admits, hanging his head. "And… and then, um. I…"

No. He can't say it. He can't say it.

He should be dead.

"I went to the Event Horizon," he finishes instead, face hot and heart pounding. There's no way Kal and Lois need Kal's superhearing to be able to tell Kon's leaving something out.

But instead of prodding him further, Kal just pets his hair again, slow and gentle. When he speaks, his voice is slow and gentle, too, like he's talking to a spooked animal back on the farm.

"Okay." Kal smooths his hand over Kon's hair again. "Do you think you wanna talk about why you've been unhappy? If you don't, we won't pry." He shoots a pointed look at Lois at that last bit, and Kon almost laughs. As it is, he can't quite bring himself to smile.

“It—” He breaks off, clears his throat, and chews at his lower lip. “You won’t like hearing it.”

Lois snorts. “We’re made of some tough stuff, squirt. We can handle it.” She squeezes his shoulder again. “If that’s the only thing holding you back, don’t let it.”

“Yeah,” Kal agrees. “Even more than anything you might say, I don’t like that you’re hurting entirely on your own.”

Damn. That’s…

That’s really hard to argue with, actually. Kon’s chest gets a little tight, his eyes a little watery again, because it’s once again Kal telling him he loves him, and…

Man. *Man.*

He takes a breath. Blows it out. Scrubs a hand at his face. “Okay. Um.”

Kon stares down into his tea. Lois’s hand is warm on his shoulder.

“Kal,” he says, hollow. “…Do you ever… Do you ever wish you didn’t come back?”

He can feel Lois stiffen, can hear both of their heart rates increase. They exchange looks over his head, but he doesn’t care enough to look up, shame sitting heavy in his gut.

“What do you mean, Kon?” Kal asks. His voice is gentle, but Kon knows him well enough to hear the fierce worry, the protective steel beneath it.

After so long being held in, the words all but pour out. Kon swallows a too-hot sip of tea that doesn’t scald going down. “I was made to be like you,” he says. “You died saving the world. I was—don’t you get it? Kal, I was made to die saving the world. I was *made* to die. And I did. So—” His voice cracks. “So why am I *back?”*

For a moment, Kal is completely, utterly frozen.

Kon shrinks into Lois. He shouldn’t have said that, should he? Fuck, Kal probably doesn’t like to think about his own death! Why would Kon just bring it up all willy-nilly like that? And now he’s adding his own stupid whiny baby issues—

“Is that what they forced into your head at Cadmus?” Kal asks evenly.

His voice is mild, but with an undercurrent of something icy, furious, and terrible. He hasn't moved, his expression is blank, and yet somehow, looking at him, Kon understands how entire planets can fear his wrath.

And then Lois leans over and smacks his shoulder. *"Clark."*

Just like that, the veneer of transcendent, otherworldly rage falls away. Kal's shoulders slump slightly, and he shakes his head. He looks like himself again, just… horribly, ruinously sad.

"I'm sorry, Kon." He gently knocks his temple against Kon's. "I'm not angry with you. I'm angry with… with whoever made you believe that."

Kon swallows hard against the thickness in his throat. "What… what do you mean? It's the truth, Kal, it's—it's what I was made for."

Kal closes his eyes for a moment. "No, Kon." He shakes his head. "It is *not."*

"Even if it's what Paul Westfield or his staff made you think," Lois adds, a hint of her usual sharpness lacing through her words, "I think I speak for this entire family when I say that none of us give a singular flying *fuck* what those assholes intended for you."

Kal nods sharply. "You don't owe your life to—you don't owe your life to *anybody,* Kon," he says, and Kon is startled to realize that his voice is a little thick, too. "Not to me. Not to Cadmus. Not even to the world. You're not here to die for anyone. You're—you're here for one reason only."

Fuck. Kon's definitely about to cry again. Lois rubs his back as he sniffles, sipping his tea again to try and swallow down the tears. *Be cool, dammit.* "Y-yeah? What's that?"

"To *live,* Kon-El." Kal still sounds so, so sad. "You're here to live."

Kal leans in and wraps his arms around Kon. Lois does, too, both of them sandwiching him in a big, warm hug. Kon's vision blurs with tears again, tea or no tea, and the sob fighting its way up his throat is so potent it burns.

"There you go," Lois murmurs, squeezing his shoulders. "Let it out, kiddo. You Kent boys never want to let it out. It's okay. It's okay."

“I—I don’t know *how,”* Kon blubbers, staring wide-eyed down into his tea. A tear rolls down his cheek, drips from his chin into his mug. “I’m —I’m doing this all wrong, I don’t—I don’t know…”

“There’s no right way to come back from the dead,” Kal says softly. “It wasn’t easy for me, either. You’re doing fine, son. You’re doing just fine.”

Kon’s a *mess.* But if Kal somehow thinks that’s good enough for him, Kon’s… too tired to argue.

“I… Okay,” he sniffles. “Okay.”

They hold him as he cries, and the daylight drags on into afternoon. Kara and the boys will be back soon, and Kon doesn’t want either of the kids seeing him upset, but it’ll be nice to see them.

The nice thing about crying on Superman is that, even though all three of their teas are cold by the time Kon quiets again, Kal just reheats them with a glance.

And sitting there, as Kara’s key sounds in the door and Chris and Jon tumble into the apartment, filling the space with chatter, Kon leans into Kal’s side, just listening. Kal doesn’t let him go, just greets his sons with a warm smile from where he sits. The boys bound over to Lois as she gets up to hug them, excitedly talking over each other as they each try to butt in and tell her about their adventures at the arcade first, and Kara meanders over to the sofa.

“Sooo yeah,” she says, settling down at Kon’s other side, in the spot Lois vacated. “I *definitely* bought them too much candy.”

For the first time since his fight with Tim, Kon laughs.

Kara’s head falls against his shoulder. Kon’s still leaning on Kal; the three of them make a little train on the couch. “I don’t know how you can wrangle ‘em for as long as you do,” she sighs fondly. “I’m *beat.”*

“The farm’s good practice,” Kon tells her, and she snorts out a laugh, covering her mouth with one hand.

He’s still all jumbled up inside and confused and hurting, but it… it’s a little easier to bear, right now. Here, in an apartment full of his family, where the only ones missing are Ma and Pa, and the room is full of afternoon sunlight and laughter. Here, he can breathe a bit easier, his first respite after days of nightmares and tension and

everything else.

It's… kind of nice to have gotten some of it off his chest. And it's nice to be here, and to just… *be.*

Kon closes his eyes. For now, at least, he feels loved.

It's pretty cool.

Chapter End Notes

> *slaps roof of kon* this guy can fit so many fucking issues in him. also blows a kiss to the sky for aura (lindsay wah, in the tags). superboy and the ravers my beloved. did you all know kon has canonically had a gay friend + been an ally since the 90s? he has a gay friend who comes out and dates an alien in the 90s. i love you superboy and the ravers
>
> if you want some mood music for the clark + kon / clois + kon parts btw. "let your burden be" by brett shady. this is the clark & kon song of all time, to me.
>
> also before anyone says it: "why is he not considering that bisexuality is a possibility?????" have you ever been confused and closeted in a small town where you're a lot more worried about the feelings you're feeling than the correct terminology for describing said feelings? yeah. (also for the record i do write him as gay and not bi but that won't be coming up in this fic bc the comp het is REAL and he does not have the vocab or self-awareness to tackle that for a while.)
>
> anywhoozies, last chapter in a week again, see yall then!

Chapter 3: just before the dawn

Chapter Summary

> Kon gets some cousinly bonding time in, manages to put some words on his feelings, and admits a terrifying secret to Ma, on purpose and everything. Tim goes for a drive.

Chapter Notes

> no new warnings, but all the previous ones do still apply just in terms of what's discussed!
>
> sorry for being so late also... oop.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The late afternoon air is brisk and refreshing. Pale wisps of clouds paint streaks against the deep blue sky, and the sunlight on Kon's back is soothing and warm.

He sighs, stretching his legs out. Up here on top of the Planet's big golden globe, the city sprawls out down below, glistening and bright. It's… nice. He can see why Kal likes to hang out up here so much.

Next to him, Kara slurps up another mouthful of boba, chewing on the pearls. She tilts her head to the side, the wind whipping her hair out behind her. "…You were right," she says thoughtfully. "This stuff *is* pretty good. What'd you get me again? Lavender something?"

"Honey lavender pearl milk tea," Kon says. "Next time you head over to SF, let me know and I can come with! There's a *lot* of good boba cafés out there."

Metropolis has good ones too, of course, but they're not on almost every street corner, not like they are in the Bay Area. Still, the one he and Kara went to after leaving Kal's place today is pretty solid.

"Is that where you first tried it?" Kara asks, glancing over to him. She has the same eyes as him and Kal. It's a little strange, seeing them in a face that isn't a mirror of his own.

Sometimes, when Kon looks at her, it hits him that she was supposed to have a whole family of people who look like them. She *did* have a family, and then they were ripped away from her. Twice over. He can

hardly imagine that kind of pain.

He shakes his head. “Nah, I first tried it in Hawai’i. Waaay back when, while you were still in space.”

“Oh.” Kara takes another sip of her tea. “Right.”

Kon’s already all but finished his; he sucks up the last two pearls left in his cup and chews them slowly. Honeyed sweetness blooms on his tongue.

Kara lets out a breath. “…Hey, Kon. Can I ask you a kinda weird question?"

"Yeah, 'course," Kon says. "Shoot."

Kara takes a moment to respond. "Right. Well, I was wondering, uh… Do you ever, like, I dunno… feel like an outsider here?”

Kon looks at her again, at the sun glinting off her golden hair. Her cape flutters in the wind, the edge caught where she’s sitting on it. She’s even more of an alien than he is.

“All the time,” he answers, more truthfully than he means to. “You too, huh?”

Kara nods. She looks at him a little uncertainly, takes another sip of her tea. Kon employs the tactic Kal and Lois used on him so effectively, and waits.

“Is that why you, uh, yesterday…?” She ducks her head and makes a face immediately afterwards, though, then shakes her head quickly. “Sorry, I don’t mean to pry—I swear I didn’t listen in, Kal told me it was private and I respected that! I just, um. Was wondering.”

Kon’s stomach drops out a bit, and he chews at his lip. He feels much more like himself now than he did yesterday, sure, but that doesn’t really mean a lot, not when “himself” is still… a mess. There’s so much he still doesn’t know, about what he is, about… everything. And he can tell Kara’s really, earnestly trying to connect with him; it’s sweet. He wants to reach back out to her. It’s just that he doesn’t know what to say.

“That was more, uh…” Kon heaves a sigh and rakes his hand through his hair. “That was, uh, more like… some resurrection-related freaking out?” It comes out a little more like a question than a statement, but

oh well.

Kara takes that at face value, at least. She nods, then reaches over and lays her hand over his. Her fingers are cold from her cup.

“I’m glad you’re back,” she says earnestly, and Kon believes her. “I missed you.”

That comes as a bit of a surprise. Kon cocks his head to the side. “You did?” He blinks. “I mean—that sounded mean. I meant, like—you know, we barely got the chance to hang out, before… you know. I died.”

Kara lets out a slow breath. “Kon, I barely have *anyone* left. And you’re family.” She looks a little hurt, a little uncertain. “I mean… I thought you—if you don’t feel that way about me, that’s—”

“No no no, I do, I do!” Kon hastily reassures her. “I just—I guess I didn’t realize, um…” He rubs the back of his neck awkwardly. It’s a habit he picked up from Pa. But that thought hurts; he quickly pushes it away. “Aw, man, there’s like, no good way to phrase this. Uh…”

Kara laughs, at least. Score. “It’s okay. Just say it.”

Kon rakes his hand through his hair. “Okay, fine. It’s been—kind of a lot? Coming back and, y’know. Seeing that me dying, like… actually impacted people.”

Kara reels back with a look of shock. “What?! Of course it impacted people! You *died,* Kon! Everyone who cares about you—you’ve lost people before, haven’t you? You know it hurts!”

Kon winces. “See, this is what I meant about not knowing how to put it.” He chews at his lower lip for a moment, staring out at the horizon. Kara’s hand tightens over his. “I do know it hurts. I do. I just—I got this weird disconnect in my head, about it being different when it’s me.”

Because he was made to die. He was made to die saving the world, and he did. That was his purpose… or at least, he really thought it was. But after how badly his success—his death— tore apart so many people he loves, he can’t quite reconcile the thoughts.

There’s a tiny voice in his head that says maybe Kal was right. Maybe it really is that simple—he’s here just to live. But it’s hard to let go of a truth he’s known his whole life, especially for a new one that sounds

way too good to be true.

Kara softens next to him. The wind blows her hair into her eyes, and she tosses her head, scrunching up her face.

“I guess that makes sense,” she says, squeezing his hand. “…You wanna know something, though?”

“What?”

She lets go of his hand to dig through one of the pockets on her skirt and pulls out a glasses case. She opens it, turns it around to show him, and ducks her head a little shyly. “I’ve been wearing these, in my civilian identity.”

Kon blinks down at the glasses. They’re a familiar oval shape, with simple silver wire frames. His breath catches in his throat. “Are those…”

“Yours,” Kara confirms, her voice so soft the wind almost drowns it out. “I didn’t have a civilian identity at first, you know? I was spending all my time as Supergirl. But after you died, some other stuff happened, and I just… spiraled. Lana suggested a civilian identity to help me figure out how to fit in on Earth, and, um, when I mentioned I was trying to put one together… Tim gave me these.”

Kon’s heart stops.

“…Tim had my glasses?” he hears himself ask, as if from a great distance. The blood roars in his ears.

Kara nods, a funny look on her face. “You didn’t know?”

Oh, god. *Tim.*

A rising tide of emotion swells in Kon’s chest and grips his heart so tight it’s hard to breathe. Tim loves him. Tim loves him so damn much, and it’s been two days since Kon snapped at him and ran off because he couldn’t handle Tim caring about him. He hasn’t even opened any of the texts Tim’s sent him because he’s been so caught up in his own head.

“Oh,” Kara murmurs. “He… yeah. He kept them. And some of your other stuff, I think. He—losing you hit him and Cassie both really hard, Kon.”

“I—I know,” Kon manages. It takes conscious effort not to dig his fingers into the smooth metal of the globe beneath them both. “I just —I didn’t know he… he kept my glasses.”

Tim must’ve gone into his room to get them. At the farm. Ma and Pa probably let him in, knowing he was grieving. Kon didn’t have them on him when he died; if he had, they would’ve been crushed to smithereens.

It was—

It was a brutal way to die, if he’s honest.

Kara pauses, studying him. Kon stares out at the horizon for several seconds and tries to get himself back under control. He doesn’t need to think about it. He’s up here, under the wide open blue sky, and he can breathe just fine. There’s no rod spearing through his ribs, no tons of metal and concrete grinding his bones to dust.

He’s fine.

Kara’s hand settles over his again. A spark shoots through him, pulling him back into the present. “Kon?”

Kon sucks in a breath. “Sorry,” he says reflexively. “Zoned out for a second.”

“It’s okay.” Kara’s still studying his face. “…Do you want them back? I mean, they’re yours.”

“What? No.” Kon blinks at her. “You keep ‘em. I… it makes me happy to know you wanted ‘em.”

Kara’s shoulders relax incrementally, and her smile grows. “Of course I wanted them. You’re my cousin. You’re family.” Her smile fades again, and she looks down. “There’s so few Kryptonians left now, Kon, and… I feel awful that you can’t even get to see Kandor again. It’s my fault, what happened to New Krypton—”

“It’s not,” Kon insists. He grabs her hand and squeezes hard. Kara looks up at him in surprise, and Kon squeezes again. “It’s *not.* It was Luthor, and that awful bastard general”—he doesn’t even want to call him *General Lane;* it’s an affront to Lois—”but never, *ever* yours.”

Kara looks startled. “But Reactron—”

Kon fixes her with his best impression of Ma's *that's-enough-of-that-talk* stare. "Nope."

Kara wavers. Kon can see her thinking about arguing further, but he holds his ground and hopes to the high heavens he can channel Ma as well as he'd like.

Finally, Kara's shoulders slump. "Okay," she allows. "Agree to disagree." She offers a wan smile.

Kon nods; it's absolutely not her fault, but if he can't bring himself to accept that maybe his death wasn't, like… a good thing, then he can't blame her for struggling to let go of her guilt. "Truce for now."

"Truce." Her smile softens. "I still just wish… you could've seen it properly. Spent more time there, with me and Kal. I wish…"

Yeah, that sounds nice on paper and all, but Kon shifts his weight a little awkwardly. Sure, he and Alura Zor-El got off on the wrong foot and all, but that doesn't make it sting any less that she stood aside and let General Zod call him a *clone,* a *creature,* like his entire existence was some kind of dirty word.

"I mean…" He rubs the back of his neck again. "I appreciate the thought, really, I do, but, uh… I didn't exactly get the sense that folks on New Krypton cared much for people like me. You know. Clones."

Kara's eyes widen. "Oh," she says, and then, softer, *"Oh,"* like he's punched all the wind from her lungs. "Oh, Kon, I—I thought Zod and the others, after I told them—?"

"They played nice until your back was turned," Kon says, vaguely uncomfortable. "It's not your fault, I mean, it's not like he was the only one or anything. From what Kal taught me, I mean, the clone stuff isn't exactly a new conflict. Black Zero 'n' all. So I guess I shoulda expected it."

Several emotions flicker over Kara's face. She stares at him for a moment, troubled, and then abruptly lurches forward and throws her arms around his neck. She squeezes him even tighter than Kal does, the ice in her cup cold against his back. Kon brings his arms up around her, too, and wonders which of them needs the hug more right now.

Kara lets out a breath. "I know you probably didn't feel that wanted," she admits, her arms tightening around him. Her voice trembles, just a

little. “But Kon, I swear. If you’d met him… my father would have *loved* you.”

Something cracks a little bit in Kon’s chest. He sucks in a breath and blows it out against her shoulder. “…Yeah?”

“Yeah,” Kara murmurs, soft and full of emotion. “He would have loved you so, so much.”

It strikes Kon then that he never even thought about what it’d be like, to have a bigger family. He spent so long wishing for parents, siblings maybe, that he never even thought about what it might be like to have cousins. Aunts. Uncles.

He never even knew what he was missing. What a weird kind of grief. If it even counts as grief.

“I wish I coulda met him, then,” he mumbles, and surprises himself by just how much he means it. “Maybe you could… I dunno. Tell me about him sometime. Or—or about Krypton, in general. What you loved about it and stuff.”

Kara draws back to look at him with bright, shiny eyes. She beams, nodding, and scrubs a hand over her face. “I’d love that. I really, really would.”

She has his glasses. The reality of it slaps Kon upside the head all over again as he looks at her. She loves him, even though they barely got the chance to know each other before he died. She’s loved him this whole time.

“Kara,” he says, hesitant. “Could I… ask you something? About… Kryptonian culture, I guess?”

“Anything,” Kara says, and he can tell she means it.

Kon bites his lip. He can’t quite meet her eyes; he stares at the golden hair whipping around her shoulders instead. Shame still curdles in his gut, and anxiety makes his heart thrum in his chest. He’s sure she can hear it.

“Uh… so for my sake, let’s just agree right now that this is a purely hypothetical question. Or, uh, not for any reason other than, like, general curiosity about your—my—uh, *our* culture.” He rubs the back of his neck again, awkward, but he can see that ending his stumble on *our* made her smile.

“Okay,” Kara agrees. Phew. It’s obviously more than that, but Kon appreciates that she’s gonna let him keep pretending. He’s just—he can’t say it yet. Not like he did to Aura.

“Okay.” Kon blows out a breath and fixes his gaze on the distant horizon. “So… I know we don’t exactly have the same gender and sex stuff going on as humans do, but did that, like… translate to, uh. Marriage, and stuff? Like… was it a big deal if two dudes wanted to get hitched? Or two chicks? Or…”

“Oh,” Kara breathes. “No, not at all. It was—um, like you said, we don’t have the same degree of dimorphism as humans, so. It was much more evidently a spectrum, so people would just marry… people. The real scandal was interguild marriages, especially ones involving the Labor Guild.” She hesitates. “That’s… actually, that’s one thing that weirds me out so much about Earth. Why’s it such a big deal?” One of her hands fidgets with her skirt. “I mean… I don’t know if you met her, but. My first kiss was Thara Ak-Var. She, uh… became Flamebird, and all that.”

“Oh,” Kon says numbly. Kara’s kissed a girl. And doesn’t think it’s a big deal.

The relief is so poignant that hysterical laughter bubbles up in his chest. He has to try really, really hard to swallow it back down, giddy. What a weight off his chest.

His cousin. He’s got a gay cousin—the jokes almost write themselves. Are they *both* the gay cousin?

Kara gives him a thoughtful look. “So… is it Tim? Or Bart?”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa, what?!” Kon reels back. “We just agreed it’s totally hypothetical, general cultural inquiry, not for any reasons that have anything to do with me!”

Kara’s expression goes from *thoughtful* to *unimpressed.* “Kon…”

His ruse was transparent as glass, but he was really hoping she’d let him keep it up. And he knows it’s only fair if he admits it—she just admitted she kissed a girl—but the thought of actually putting any of … of *this* into words, let alone voicing it, makes his heart seize with panic. “I—”

He breaks off, bites the inside of his lip hard. He *knows* it’s just his mind playing tricks on him, but he swears he can still taste that

Daxamite's cock, hot and heavy on his tongue. Shame bubbles up alongside the panic, mixing into a truly unfortunate stew in the pit of his stomach.

"Whoa, okay, hey, it's okay!" Kara backpedals, eyes wide. She grabs his hand again, squeezes it hard. "Sorry. I, um—I didn't realize it was bothering you that much. You don't have to say anything."

Kon hangs his head, both relieved and even more ashamed. He squeezes her hand back, closing his eyes, and blows out a breath. Talking around it is a lot easier than confronting it directly. "It's… I don't *know.* Honest. I'm kinda freaking out about it 'cuz I've… never even thought about this stuff before."

Kara tilts her head in thought. "Yeah," she says slowly. "I guess you've… I mean, Earth culture is all you've ever known, right? So it makes sense it's, um… a big deal to you."

"Yeah." Kon blows out a breath. "…Please don't tell anyone."

Kara smiles at him, warm and sunny. "Don't worry, cousin," she says, and rests her head on his shoulder. "Your secret is safe with me."

After dinner, Kon makes some nice, cozy green tea.

There's a big, blustery storm coming in tonight; the winds have been high since afternoon, buffeting him all over as he flew back in from Metropolis. The rain pitter-patters against the windows, though the wind occasionally blows it hard against the glass. It's good weather for curling up on the big sofa with some tea and watching some *Star Trek* with Ma before bed.

Once it's properly steeped, Kon tosses the leaves and picks up both mugs, flicking the lights off in the kitchen with TTK. Krypto follows at his heels as he crosses the breakfast nook and heads over to the living room, where Ma—

Kon balks in the doorway.

Ma's standing at the fireplace, tenderly cradling a photo frame in both hands. Kon can't see it from this angle, but he doesn't need to; he knows exactly which frame sits proudly in the center of the mantelpiece.

It's Ma and Pa's favorite wedding photo. It's old and grainy, slightly

yellowed at the edges, if you look real close; the photo was taken right after Pa dipped Ma for a kiss at the altar, then brought her back upright. Ma's clinging to his shoulders, while Pa's arms are wrapped around her waist, and they're both laughing and laughing, too delighted to look anywhere but at each other.

Kon's heart aches.

He makes sure to step on the creaky floorboard on the left as he walks in, sets the mugs down on the coffee table. Krypto's claws clack against the hardwood as he follows. "Here's your tea, Ma."

Ma doesn't turn. "Thank you, dear heart," she says, her voice soft and wistful.

Kon hesitates. Stares at her back for a moment, at the old green cardigan wrapped around her shoulders. There's more gray in her hair than there was before he died. She still carries herself with dignity and grace, but losing Pa has dulled the light in her eyes. It's still there, but it doesn't shine quite as bright as it used to.

Kon shifts his weight. Bites his lip. Fidgets with the hem of his shirt. Finally sinks to sit awkwardly on the edge of the sofa.

"Ma," he says, dropping his gaze to the floor. "…I'm sorry it was me who came back, and not him."

There. He's finally come out and said it. The words hang heavy in the space between them, their weight flowing from Kon's chest into the open air.

A beat passes.

Ma lets out a slow breath and carefully sets the photo back onto the mantelpiece.

Then she turns, and the fire in her eyes makes him genuinely lose his balance for a second in shock; his TTK latches onto the sofa to keep him from toppling over onto his back. What—where did that come from? Why's she—?!

"Conner Kent." Ma's eyes flash. Her voice stays even, but Kon is shocked to see that her hands are trembling. "Don't you *ever* say that to me, ever, *ever* again. Don't even think it—not under my roof, or anyone else's, either! Do you hear me?"

“Wh-what?” Kon flounders, gaping up at her like a clown. “But—why are you mad? I thought—I thought you’d… I mean, it’s not like I *could* trade myself for him anyways, it’s—it’s just, you know, the sentiment…?”

Ma’s face does something funny, like she can’t decide whether to lecture him or burst into tears. That’s terrifying. The last thing he ever, ever wants to do is make her cry.

Hesitant, Kon shuffles a little closer to her. “…Ma?”

Ma sits down hard on the sofa next to him and wraps her arms around his neck. She pulls him into a fierce hug, cradling his head in her hands as she guides him to tuck his face into her shoulder. “Oh, my darling boy,” she breathes, and to his horror, her voice is thick. “Is that really what you’ve been thinking this whole time?”

“Um.” Kon hesitates, uncertain. He gets the feeling she wouldn’t like it if he says *yes,* even if it’s true. “…No?”

“Oh, *Conner.”* Ma squeezes him tighter, like she can fold him up small and hide him away from the world. It hits him suddenly that she might just be where Kal learned to be such a good hugger.

Ma draws back, cradles his face in her callused hands. She smooths her thumb over his cheek, shaking her head, and pulls him down so that she can kiss his forehead.

“I would *never* want to trade you for Jonathan. Not in a million years.” She kisses his forehead again, as if she hasn’t just turned his entire world on its head. “And if I ever wanted to, Jonathan’d *never* forgive me for it.”

Kon gapes at her. “B-but he’s—he’s your *husband!”* And Kon was made to die. He was made to die saving the world—why does no one but him realize that? That was what he was made for.

Why did fulfilling his only purpose hurt everyone he loves so much? Why would Ma say that?

…Was Kal really right about him?

Ma meets his gaze levelly, but her eyes are suspiciously bright. “And you’re our boy.”

Kon’s eyes prickle. “Ma, I…”

Ma sighs, caresses his cheek again, then takes both of his hands in hers. She strokes her thumbs over his knuckles. “Dear heart. When you get to my age, when you’ve raised a child, let alone two… you see things differently than young folks.

“Jonathan and I—we had our whole lives together. We had so many wonderful, beautiful years. And when you live your whole life beside someone, when you get old, well… We always knew, one of us would leave this world before the other. It’s something you can’t avoid thinking about, when you get older. I miss him, of course I miss him, but I always knew there was a chance I’d outlive him. Same way he always knew there was a chance he’d outlive me.”

She pauses.

“You, though, dear…” Ma’s gaze falls to their joined hands. “We were never supposed to outlive *you.”*

Oh, god, her voice is quavery and her smile is wobbly and her eyes are teary. Kon’s just made Ma *cry.* She squeezes his hands, and Kon swallows hard against the lump in his throat and squeezes back.

“Ma,” he says again, helpless. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to upset you.”

Ma shakes her head. “Don’t apologize. This is what has been eating you up inside, hasn’t it?”

Kon chews at his lip and drops his gaze. Krypto, flopped on his side on the rug, lets out a big, sleepy sigh, and Kon focuses on him, the rise and fall of his ribs as he breathes.

Taking his silence as answer enough, Ma smiles, stroking her thumbs over his knuckles again. His hands are so much smoother than hers. “I thought so. You’ve been troubled lately.”

An apology hovers on the tip of his tongue—sorry for being troubled. Sorry for making her worry. Sorry for bringing it up—but he can’t bring himself to say it. Maybe Kal really did put a crack in the base of his worldview, or maybe he’s just too exhausted to keep his charades up.

“I guess, yeah,” he says instead, his voice small. “I thought… I thought I did something *right.* I—I thought I saved everyone, and it was a good thing.”

Ma closes her eyes for a moment, her expression pained. She heaves a

great, big sigh, then reaches up to stroke the curly hair back from his forehead. He really needs to cut it again soon.

"It was, and it wasn't." Her knuckles tenderly graze his cheek. "Of course it's good, saving the world. All these people who don't deserve to die for a madman's ego trip. But, sweetheart, *you* didn't deserve to die for it, either."

"That's not—" Kon fumbles. He knows Ma won't like hearing him say it, but he doesn't know how to stop believing it, even if he wants to. "It's—it's… what I was made for, Ma."

Ma's brow furrows. "What is?"

Kon sucks in a breath. Lets it out. "Dying. To save the world. It's—it's the entire reason they made me. I was—I was made to be like Superman. And I was only made 'cuz Superman died saving the world. That's—that's what they made me for."

He half-expects her to get steely and indignant on his behalf, that same righteous fire in her eyes as a minute ago.

Instead, Ma looks heartbroken.

"I wish we'd known better," she says after a moment, a quaver in her voice. "I wish we'd taken you in sooner. I—" She breaks off, looks at him for a long, long moment. "I remember watching the news, back when Clark first came back, when you were first showing your face to the world."

Kon tries not to cringe. He was an annoying little dipshit back then, mouthy and arrogant and naïve. He can't watch most of his old interviews or ad spots anymore without wanting to shrivel up and die on the spot. How anyone could stand him is a miracle.

"And I remember," Ma continues, "hearing about that missile headed for Metropolis. Jonathan and I were so afraid we were gonna lose Lois, too, right after we'd lost Clark; we didn't know he was really, truly back, then. Not yet. And you saved everyone. But they all thought you'd sacrificed yourself for it, at the time."

She looks at him so intently it's like he's made of glass, and she may as well be looking right through him. She doesn't say it, but she doesn't have to.

Oh. That's what she's thinking about. Right.

Kon swallows hard again. "…It didn't kill me?" he tries, but it's cold comfort and he knows it. "I mean, what else was I supposed to do, let it hit Metropolis?"

Ma shakes her head, but her eyes stay fixed on his face, still piercing right through him to his soul. She reaches up, cups his chin. "Dear heart, I'm gonna ask you something. And I want you to answer me, really and honestly. Alright?"

Kon bites his lip. "Um, sure."

Ma holds his gaze for a moment. She takes a breath, then lets it out. "Conner… did you *want* to die?"

"No!" Kon bursts out, horrified. "No, of course not! I—I'm not suicidal, I've never even tried to kill myself—I mean, okay, I guess *technically* I tried once, but that doesn't count 'cuz it wasn't *just* me and I didn't even commit—but that's not important! No! I wasn't trying to die! I just… I was just…" He hangs his head. "I was okay with it happening, I guess."

For a moment, Ma is silent. Kon peeks up to find her studying him, pensive and melancholy. She tilts her head as he meets her gaze again. "You tried to kill yourself once?"

Oh. Shit. He did say that out loud, didn't he?

"I…"

Abruptly, it's all too much. Kon pulls his knees to his chest, lowers himself down, and curls up with his head on Ma's thigh. He's not used to feeling tiny and fragile next to her, but she manages to make him feel just like Kal does, sometimes.

"Oh, sweetheart," Ma murmurs, and threads her fingers into his hair. "It's alright. It's alright."

"Technically," Kon mumbles into her knee, "it was a murder-suicide attempt, not just suicide. I just—I thought I had to kill us both to take her down. And I mean—I figured I deserved—I…"

God, it's hard to think about Kay. Even now, he shies away from the thought of her betrayal—she didn't even see it as a betrayal; he was just a gullible idiot who wanted so badly to believe the best of her. And she laughed at him, perfectly willing to pin him down, kiss him, and kill him all at once.

“You didn’t deserve it,” Ma says, stalwart even though she doesn’t know what happened. “It’s alright.”

Kon sucks in a breath. Blows it out. “Did you ever hear about, um. Me and Knockout?” he asks hesitantly, shame making his cheeks heat. “I dunno if that news ever left the islands.” Mae heard, of course, but…

“I didn’t.” Ma strokes his hair, slow and soothing. It’s kind of the way Kon pets Krypto late at night, right before bed, when they’re both calm and sleepy. “Tell me?”

Kon takes a deep breath. “She… was a supervillain I met in Hawai’i. Only I thought—I really thought she was trying to change. Everyone thought she’d killed a man, but I thought she was innocent, so—so I hid her from the authorities, and—well, y’know, that didn’t. Uh. Look great for me. So a lot of people were mad at me, but I thought it was a big misunderstanding so I kept trying to advocate for her, and… and she was telling me all this stuff about how I didn’t need anyone but her anyway, after everyone was mad at me, and…”

He chews at his lip for a second. Twines his fingers into Ma’s cardigan, holding on like a little kid clinging for reassurance.

“And then I found out she *had* actually killed that guy, and she wanted to make me kill someone else for her, and when I was, like, obviously not on board with that, she tried to kill me. And I thought—I mean, I’d been aiding and abetting her, right? Doesn’t matter what I thought, I was still helping her get away from facing justice.

“And she was—she was a lot stronger than I was, back then. So the only way I could take her down was keeping us both trapped on a piece of volcanic rock sinking into the ocean. Y’know. Drowning us both. Except once we were under for a minute, I… I realized I just couldn’t take anyone’s life, not even hers. I just couldn’t do it.”

He takes a breath. Lets it out again. He’s not sure he’s ever told anyone about Kay, actually, not really. Like, he talked to Roxy about her, a little, right after the fact, but besides that, he hasn’t thought about her in years. Or at least, he’s tried not to.

“…She was, um.” It’s shameful to admit, but now that he’s started talking, he can’t quite make himself stop. “She was the person I first, um. You know. My first time. I—I thought I was in love with her. Stupid of me, I know, but. Um. Yeah.”

For a long, long moment, Ma is silent. Her fingers keep carding

steadily through Kon's hair.

"How old was she?"

"What?" Kon blinks. He's never really thought about it. "Uh… I don't actually know. She was kinda immortal-ish? I mean… I guess at least thirty. I dunno."

There's a frigid Kansas snowstorm in Ma's voice. "And you were fifteen."

"Um." Kon swallows hard. That does sound kinda bad. Saying *actually, I wasn't even one* sounds even worse. "…Yeah."

Ma lets out a hissed breath. "It's not right," she says after a moment. "That's not right. You know, don't you? That wasn't right."

Kon doesn't know what to say. "I… I mean, it wasn't like… I wasn't… she didn't, like, *make* me do anything, so…"

Ma makes a disapproving noise. "You were a child, and she manipulated and took advantage of you. No ifs, ands, or buts changes that."

"I was a hero," Kon objects. "Heroes don't… the rules are different for us."

Ma presses her lips together. "So if it happened to, say, your friend Bart, or Tim…"

The thought of Bart or Tim having to deal with Knockout grabbing them on the field and groping and kissing them without a single care in the world—

Kon full-body flinches.

Ma rubs his shoulder soothingly, strokes his hair, and coos. "Oh, darling. There. You're alright now. You see what I mean, though? It wasn't right."

"I… I dunno," Kon manages, and swallows hard. "Ma, I—it wasn't… I'm not…"

"There are words for it," Ma says gently. "For an adult hurting a child like that. But you don't have to use them until you're good and ready." She pauses. "…Have you told anyone about this? Clark, or Lois, or your friends…?'

Kon shakes his head and closes his eyes. He's not used to feeling so tiny. "…Just you."

"Oh, dear heart." Ma squeezes his shoulder. "Okay. Alright. That's alright."

The wind blows a spatter of rain against the windows, whipping around the edges of the house. Lightning flashes behind the curtains; rain pounds against the roof and waterfalls down the gutterspouts. Kon listens to the thunder rumble outside and reminds himself to breathe.

"…I really thought I was in love with her, Ma," he admits, his voice smaller than he means it to be. "And she said I was basically just a… a toy to her." He takes a breath. The house feels too big for just the two of them and Krypto. He misses Pa. "Sometimes I think… I just—I'm not made to be loved back. I dunno. I thought—I thought it'd be easy for everyone to move on after I was dead, 'cuz I was… you know. Made for it. Not made to be loved, anyways. But now I'm just—I'm so *confused."*

"Oh, Conner, dearest." Ma's voice is more tender than he's ever heard it. Tears prickle at the corners of his eyes; his chest feels tight. "Oh, darling. You are so, so loved. Don't you ever question it. Losing you—losing you was like losing Clark all over again. It tore us up inside. All of us, not just me and Jonathan. I don't care what those awful scientists at Cadmus told you—whatever they thought they made you for, it doesn't matter. You *are* loved. And you have your whole life ahead of you to keep discovering it."

She strokes his hair back from his forehead again. Kon blinks back tears and definitely doesn't sniffle about it or anything. Everyone keeps being so gentle with him as they turn his world on its head—Ma, Kal, Kara—and he doesn't know how he's supposed to stay intact.

"And," Ma continues, "just because you and Cassie didn't work out doesn't mean you won't find someone to love you that way, either. You're *young,* sweetheart. You've got time. Don't be all in a rush. You've got plenty of time."

Him and Cassie. Ha. Yeah.

Dying in her arms definitely put a damper on things there. And now there's the whole issue of Kon coming back and being all wrong in the head. Kara said it's not weird for Kryptonians, but Kon is barely even a real Kryptonian at all, and he can't shake the sense that *he's* wrong

for it. He's all jumbled up and confused and…

Kon's heart leaps to his throat. What if he tells Ma?

Logically, he knows she wouldn't be upset with him. She—she knows Cassie, so she'd understand why he's so mad at himself for being all messed up and not loving Cassie like she deserves. And she would get why it's a big deal to him, more than Kara, more even than Aura. She already knows that growing up in the spotlight was a real doozy for him. That what people think of him *matters.*

He's basically already confessed it to Kara and to Aura both anyways. It's just that—it's just that saying it to Ma would make it real.

Fuck it. He's already spilling his guts to her tonight. What's one more confession?

"…Ma?"

Kon's entire body thrums with anxiety. His mouth feels dry. He doesn't *have* to say it, but he—he kind of wants to. It's terrifying, but he's getting a little tired of running from it. He's been running nonstop for days, and he's exhausted.

"Yes?"

Kon sucks in a deep breath.

"…I think I, um… I think I might like guys," he admits in a breathless whisper. "I—I know I shouldn't, but I… I think I might be. Um." He can't say it. "You know."

"Oh! Who says you shouldn't like them?" Ma asks gently. "That's more than allowed, sweetheart."

What?!

"But—" Kon is so startled he sits up to look her in the eye. "But I'm supposed to be in love with Cassie, remember?"

Ma looks at him with such intense fondness he nearly has to flee. "There's no 'supposed to' in matters of the heart, Conner. If you aren't in love with Cassie, then you aren't in love with Cassie. It doesn't mean you're a bad person for it."

Kon gapes at her. "I… But I'm… what?"

Ma chuckles and pats his cheek. “Good grief, child, you hold yourself to such standards! Let yourself breathe once in a while. It’s alright to feel the way you feel. You’re not ‘supposed to be’ in love with anyone! If you are, then wonderful, but if not, then that’s fine, too.”

What in the world is going on? He thought for sure she’d… Well, of course she’d be kind about it, not prejudiced and cruel, but—but he thought she’d echo his own thoughts. And instead she’s going and pulling the rug out from under him *again.*

It’s alright to feel the way you feel. What a simple sentence. He shouldn’t be falling to pieces about it. And yet, here he sits, a real mess in the making.

At a loss, Kon just stares at her. “I…”

Ma smiles at him. She cups his face again, draws him down so she can kiss his forehead. “I love you so very much, Conner.”

Still speechless, Kon swallows the lump in his throat and nods. “I… I love you too, Ma.”

“I know you do.” Ma pats his cheek again, smiling at him so tenderly he has to look away, down at Krypto snoozing on the rug. “You’ll be alright, dear. Now take a breath, drink your tea, and try to relax, alright?”

Kon blinks at her. Right—he made green tea for them both. “Yeah. Okay.”

Rain pounds against the windowpanes as she presses one of the mugs into his hands. Inside, it’s cozy and safe, and the warmth of the tea seeps into his skin. Kon slides one of his feet under Krypto’s warm, furry side. Krypto doesn’t even stir, drowsy beast that he is, and Kon smiles. It’s grounding.

“Hey, Ma?” he murmurs into his cup, several seconds later.

Ma hums. “Yes?”

“Thanks,” Kon says, a little awkward but incredibly earnest. “For listening.”

Ma’s smile is the warmest thing in the room. “Anytime,” she says, resting one hand on his shoulder. “Anytime, dear.” And he knows she means it.

“Rrrrr…”

Thunder rumbles in the distance as Kon opens his eyes. “Krypto? Whassamatter…?”

Krypto hasn’t gotten out of bed, but his head is up, his ears pricked forward towards the front of the house. He lets out another low, warning growl deep in his chest. “Mmrrrrrrmm…”

Blearily, Kon claws his way out of sleep a little more. It’s pitch-black in his room, the stars all blotted out by the thunderstorm, but the sheet lightning flashing across the sky lights up his room bright as day, even through the curtains. He listens, trying to figure out what’s got Krypto on guard, but not bothered enough to get up. For a moment, all he can hear is the pounding rain and the howling wind, but then…

Kon freezes.

There’s an extra heartbeat. Someone other than him, Krypto, and Ma is here. And—

Scritch-scritch. Thump, thump, scritch.

—And they’re climbing on the roof. Coming closer, by the sound of it.

“Rrrrrmmbfff.” Krypto does a tiny warning woof, not quite a bark. He’s still lying down, though, clearly not worried that the person outside is a threat. Come to think of it, that heartbeat is familiar, although admittedly Kon still struggles to keep different people’s heartbeats straight. They’re all *really* similar. He’s not quite sure how Kal does it.

Tap-tap-tap, at the window.

Krypto tilts his head. His tail thumps against the blankets once. Kon groans. Guess he’s getting out of bed for this.

He reluctantly peels the covers aside and floats out of his wonderful, cozy bed, clicks on his desk lamp with a touch of TTK, and plods across the floor. *Tap-tap-tap-tap* sounds at the window again, like an impatient bird.

“I’m coming, jeez,” Kon mutters. Krypto’s lazy ass still hasn’t gotten up. He wishes that were him. He reaches up, shoves the curtains aside,

and—

Barely illuminated by the lamplight and the lightning outside, wearing a hoodie that's soaked completely through, his hair plastered to his forehead, Tim perches on the edge of Kon's windowsill and waves.

"Hi," he calls through the glass. "Can I come in?"

What the *shit?*

Kon TTKs the window open with a rush of cold wind and rain. Even half-asleep, it's just a matter of a thought to keep any water from hitting the floor as he grabs Tim by the shoulders and hauls him inside, then slams the window shut again. "Dude, what the hell?"

"Hi," Tim says again, breathless. He looks like he could be in the next *Ring* movie, his hair plastered to his face and water streaming down his cheeks. "You haven't been answering my texts." He shivers, but squares his shoulders resolutely. "So I thought—well—I'm here to apologize. And if you're still mad and you don't wanna talk to me, that's—that's totally okay, and I'll just get back in the car and drive back to Gotham, but I wrote out a proper apology and—"

"Okay, okay, okay, stop!" Kon shakes him a little, incredulous. "You're dripping all over my floor, and it's—it's, what, one in the morning?"

"Two-fifteen-ish," Tim corrects.

"Right. Two-fifteen-ish in the morning, you're dripping all over my floor, and it's freezing out and you're gonna catch a head cold, I swear to god—"

Kon lets go of him with one hand to wheel around, squint at his dresser, and TTK a drawer open. Tim isn't *actually* dripping all over the floor, because Kon's got him wrapped in a layer of TTK, but there is a puddle slowly gathering around his feet.

"Come on, dumbass, you need a hot shower before you even think of reading off whatever script you prepared for yourself." A couple of folded clothes roll out of the dresser drawer and scoot down the side of the legs, then toss themselves over into Kon's free hand. "Here. You can borrow these."

Tim looks a little shellshocked, wide-eyed in the dim, yellow lamplight. "You—are you sure? 'Cuz seriously, if you're still mad and you want me out of your hair, I get it, you don't gotta worry about

hospitality."

A pang of guilt stabs into Kon's gut. He didn't really mean to ignore Tim's texts all weekend long; he just… couldn't even begin to think of what to say, not while his head was still so full of everything else. And then it just sort of… fell by the wayside.

"Rob." Kon squeezes his shoulder. "I'm not mad. Now go take a hot shower. Wring out what you're wearing now and leave 'em hanging on the rod by the tub, yeah? I don't wanna go run laundry while Ma's asleep, 'cuz the washing machine makes that big clanky noise, but we can wash them tomorrow."

Tim stares at him breathlessly for a moment, his lips slightly parted, as though he's been drowning, and Kon's a life preserver thrown to him in the midst of the stormy sea. "You… you're really not mad?"

The knife of guilt lodged in Kon's gut twists. "I'm not mad," he promises. "I'm—I'm sorry I left you hanging. I, uh… meant to get back to you, but… I've just. Y'know." He shrugs helplessly. "Had a lot going on."

"Oh." Tim's eyes linger on him, reading him like an open book. Kon doesn't know how much he sees. Like before, it kind of scares him. This time, though, he doesn't want to run. "Okay. Right. Are… are you okay?"

Kon shrugs one shoulder and quirks a little smile at him. "More or less. Been worse for sure." He gives Tim a little push towards the door. "Now *go.* Go on. Git."

Tim huffs out a soft, breathy laugh and rolls his eyes. "I'm not livestock, farm boy." But he does let Kon steer him to the bathroom, wrapped in TTK the entire while so he doesn't drip all over the hardwood.

The door clicks shut behind him, and after a moment, water starts to run. Kon stares at the wood grain of the door for a heartbeat, then heaves a sigh and turns back to his room. Krypto thumps his tail against the covers twice as Kon plops onto the edge of the bed and rakes a hand through his hair.

"Why didn't you remind me to text Tim back, buddy?" he asks, reaching over to scratch behind Krypto's ears. "I kept putting it off and now look. Made him drive, like, twenty whole hours. Man… that was a douchebag move of me."

Krypto licks his nose and very helpfully burps. Thanks.

But *man.* Tim said that if Kon really didn't want to see him, he'd get right back in his car and drive all the way back up to Gotham. Just like that. Even though he's soaking wet and he must be absolutely exhausted. Kon's been a total dick, avoiding thinking of what to say to him so hard that he never even read the texts Tim sent him.

Tim drove *twenty hours* to come see him. He must have started early this morning, back when Kon was still asleep on Kal's pullout couch up in Metropolis, with Kara complaining he kept hogging the blankets.

Kon flops onto his back, a little overwhelmed. "Krypto," he mumbles, reaching out until his hand bumps Krypto's side. "Why would he do that?"

He already knows the answer. It's right there, plain as day, written across Tim's face every time he looks at Kon. Tim already lost him once; he never wants to do it again.

Guilt twists further in his gut. Tim loves him—not like *that,* obviously, but Tim loves him. And by thinking he should have stayed dead, Kon's been spitting in his face this whole time.

Which means… he still can't tell Tim what's wrong.

But. Maybe, just maybe, it means he might, perhaps, just a little bit, be able to admit that, um… *maybe* Kal made some points, with that whole *you're here to live, Kon-El* thing.

Kon blows out a breath and stares up at the ceiling. Man… this is a lot.

Rolling over, he grabs his phone from his nightstand. He should read Tim's texts.

gearhead lol 🛏 [*Saturday,* 02:13 a.m.]
i'm sorry!!
i'll stop prying, i swear
come back? we can just chill
i swear i'll shut up!!!

gearhead lol 🛏 [*Saturday,* 02:20 a.m.]
okay i guess you went home
i'm sorry again. for real
i know i can be pushy but i didn't mean to upset you :(

you don't have to say anything now if youre mad
just let me know you made it home?

gearhead lol [*Saturday,* 02:49 a.m.]
kon??

gearhead lol [*Saturday,* 03:11 a.m.]
okay ill stop nagging you.
i really am sorry tho
take your time. good night, kon.

gearhead lol [*Saturday,* 10:15 a.m.]
hey, can we talk?

gearhead lol [*Saturday,* 05:39 p.m.]
okay i get that youre pissed at me. and that's fair
but the radio silence is kind of starting to freak me out
are you like. good??

gearhead lol [*Saturday,* 09:28 p.m.]
i know you're mad at me for being invasive. but
i asked bart if he'd seen you and he said no
and then he said ma asked him the same thing yesterday
where are you??? are you safe???

gearhead lol [*Saturday,* 10:10 p.m.]
ok kara told me youre in metropolis
sorry for freaking out and asking everyone
you still havent responded to any of this…
so im kind of still freaking out.
you've never given me the silent treatment before
[Message deleted.]
[Message deleted.]
[Message deleted.]
never mind. sorry again. good night.

gearhead lol [*Sunday,* 05:02 a.m.]
sorry in advance for this.

gearhead lol [*Sunday,* 04:55 p.m.]
[Message deleted.]

gearhead lol [12:01 a.m.]
changing a flat tire at midnight in a rainstorm on the side of a highway.
the things i do for you lmao

gearhead lol 🛌 [02:12 a.m.]
you awake?
guess not.

…Oh.

Kon's chest hurts. All day today—uh, yesterday—Tim was driving. When he was hanging with Kal, Lois, and the kids, having a cozy family brunch, Tim was driving. When Kon was getting boba with Kara and having talks about Krypton, Tim was driving. When Kon came home and sat there sniffling in Ma's lap, Tim was driving. Just to come see him and apologize.

Man.

"Krypto…" Kon scrolls through the texts again. What did Tim say and delete? "Oh my god. He's too good for me. He's… oh my god."

Krypto yawns, resting his head on Kon's leg. He gazes dolefully up at Kon, and Kon dutifully gives him some TTK-scritches behind the ears, just like he likes.

"I'm gonna fix this," he promises. "I… don't know how. But I'm gonna fix it."

Krypto licks his nose in agreement, and they settle in to wait. Rain pounds against the windows; the roof creaks ominously overhead. A little thrum of anxiety flutters through the pit of Kon's stomach, but it's stupid and irrational, so he ignores it. The roof isn't gonna fall on him, no matter how anxious he gets when he's sleepy.

After a few minutes, the water shuts off. Kon, halfway to dozing off again, jerks awake. Groaning, he pushes himself back into a sitting position. Thunder rumbles outside, and the roof creaks again. He pushes it out of his mind.

Tim. Who cares about the storm outside when Tim came all this way in it, just to see him?

He waits a little longer, growing antsier by the second. Tim's just a few feet away, through a couple of measly doors and walls, and Kon…

Kon really, really wants to hug him. And to say sorry, over and over, for scaring him so bad. And to hug him again after that. And… yeah. Tim drove *all day* to come see him, 'cuz he was worried. It's still really, really getting him. Tim had his glasses, he remembers with a

jolt. Tim kept his glasses. And then gave them to Kara. He doesn't even know how to *start* with that, other than by hugging him.

“Hey, Kon?” Tim’s voice drifts over from the bathroom, and Kon perks up. “Could you, uh… give me a hand here?”

Blinking the last vestiges of sleep from his vision, Kon pushes himself to his feet and hurries out of his room. “Yeah, what’s up?”

Light spills into the hallway as Tim opens the bathroom door. He’s half-dressed; Kon’s *Star Wars*-print pajama shorts are a little long on him, hanging past his knees, but he hasn’t bothered to pull on the matching shirt yet. He gives Kon a tiny smile as he pulls the door further open and gestures to him to come in.

The steam inside smells like Kon’s shampoo. Like coconut and plumeria and sea salt, because Kon’s poor heart has never quite been able to let go of Hawai’i, not in full. Despite everything that happened to him there, it was the first home he ever knew. He loves the scents of coconut and plumeria; they always make him a little wistful.

And now Tim smells like his shampoo.

Kon quickly shoves that thought out of his mind as hard as he possibly can. He’s not gonna focus on that, or even think about it remotely at *all.* He’s not gonna be a creep. Tim trusts him way too much for him to risk their friendship by being weird and creepy and… yeah.

“What’s up?” he asks, forcing himself to stare at the side of Tim’s head rather than his collarbones.

Tim hums. “Could you… help with the dressing again?” he asks, turning his back and pointing over his shoulder, as if Kon’s forgotten about the laceration wound he had to dress three nights ago. “I can’t reach.”

“Yeah! Yeah, of course.” And Kon is *not* going to be a creep about Tim’s shoulder blades and back muscles, or about having his hands on his bare skin. He’s not.

If he ever, *ever* tells Tim about being… about maybe liking… about liking guys, would Tim stop trusting him with this? Would Tim stop being comfortable getting changed in front of him, touching him like he does, sharing a bed?

The thought breaks his heart. He can never risk it.

He takes a deep breath to steady himself, under the guise of digging the first aid kit out from the cabinet behind the door. The upstairs bathroom isn't very roomy, and he's all too aware of just how close he is to Tim as he pulls the box out, sets it on the counter, and opens it. If Tim is similarly hyperaware, he shows no sign—he just turns his back and carefully brushes his hair out of the way over his shoulder, waiting.

Kon takes another breath. All the new scars on Tim's back stare at him, each one another jarring reminder that Tim has lived a whole year without him, that Tim has lost people and *suffered.*

Okay. Okay. He's just changing out the dressing. He's helped out with first aid so many times he could suture up a friend in his sleep—well, okay, no, that's a huge exaggeration. But the point is, this is simple. He can do this without freaking out.

He brushes Tim's wet hair over his shoulder, gently peels away the medical tape, then pulls the gauze pad away from Tim's pale back. Tim doesn't stiffen, but he does suck in a silent breath as the tape pulls at his skin. Uncovering his wound feels even more intimate than undressing him might.

Not that Kon's going to be thinking about *that* anytime soon. Guilt needles at his stomach for having thought it even once, just now.

He focuses on the burgundy laceration underneath, harsh against Tim's skin. It already looks better than it did three nights ago, the ends fully scabbed over, but the center still seems delicate.

Kon makes quick work of gently patting it dry. Tim lets out a soft exhalation; in the mirror, Kon can see his closed eyes, his eyelashes dark against his cheeks.

"I'm sorry, Rob," he murmurs. He hesitates for a second, his thumb brushing over one of the ridges in Tim's spine. Tim's skin is still warm from the shower. "I… I didn't mean to freak you out. I'm not mad—I was never mad at you."

Tim's eyes open, pinning him with an intent, searching look in the mirror. Kon can only hold his gaze for a second before he drops his eyes back to Tim's wound.

"You weren't?" His voice is calm, but Kon can hear the disbelief, the tentative hope. "I mean… I wouldn't blame you if you were. I was… I mean, I was being pretty pushy, I know."

Kon smiles a little despite himself. “You’re always pushy, Rob,” he says fondly.

A wan smile flickers across Tim’s face. “Maybe. But…” He heaves a sigh. “I’m still sorry I upset you. I was just… so caught up in trying to —I’ve just been worried about you. Which—I know that’s not an excuse! I’m not trying to—ugh, shit, this isn’t how I meant to say this. I wrote it all out, I…”

Kon snorts as he starts to apply the fresh dressing, gently holding it in place against the wound as his TTK pulls the medical tape over. “Hey.” He gently raps two knuckles against the back of Tim’s head. “Get out of your head, man. It’s just me.”

Which is incredibly hypocritical of him to say, but hey. Who’s counting?

It seems to do the trick, though. Tim lets out a soft breath and relaxes a little, catching Kon’s eye in the mirror for another heatbeat. His face is full of that same soft, open wonder that takes Kon’s breath away—like he’s still in awe that he can reach out and touch Kon. That Kon’s here, alive, breathing. Like he’s witnessing some kind of holy miracle, and he’s still trying to wrap his mind around the fact that the angels have allowed him to stay.

“True,” Tim agrees softly, the tiniest smile tugging at his lips. “It *is* you.”

If Kon’s heart skips a beat, he doesn’t have to acknowledge it—no, it didn’t, okay? And the extra guilt festering in his stomach doesn’t mean anything. He swallows down the discomfort in his throat and tapes down the nextside of the dressing.

“But I did write out a whole proper apology speech,” Tim continues. His smile grows wry, his eyes dancing when Kon glances up at the mirror again. “In the notes app on my phone. You know, like those makeup YouTubers that Cissie made you watch with her, that one time—”

Unexpected laughter bubbles up in Kon’s chest, and the guilt melts away. “Oh my god, dude, that was *one time!”*

“—when you had a gigglefit and started flailing and broke the coffee table?”

“That wasn’t my fault!” Kon protests. Laughter or not, his hands feel

steadier. “Anita was doing the voices, and it was really funny! C’mon, dude! Why do you still gotta bring it up?”

“Because.” Tim’s smile softens again, and Kon’s heart flip-flops in his chest. “It *was* really funny.”

Kon finishes taping down the last side of the dressing so he doesn’t have to meet Tim’s gaze while Tim’s looking at him like that. “Yeah, whatever. There,” he says, and lightly thumps Tim’s good shoulder. “Done.”

“Thanks.” Tim gives him a warm smile in the mirror, then grabs the folded shirt from the counter and pulls it over his head. It’s comfortably oversized even on Kon; Tim’s all but swimming in it. It hangs loose on his lithe, wiry frame, the seams hanging down past his shoulders, the hem all the way down to his thighs.

Kon’s heart skips a beat again. That’s stupidly endearing. He…

Oh, god, he’s being weird about this, isn’t he? He needs to stop. He needs to get ahold of himself. He’s Tim’s *best friend.* He’s going to continue being Tim’s best friend, like normal, and he’s not going to let himself panic and fuck it up like he did a few days ago. That’s how he made this entire mess to begin with.

Tim is his best friend. Whatever else might be going on in Kon’s weird, fucked up head, Tim’s his best friend. And he wants to do right by him.

“Anytime,” Kon says honestly. “Anything, for you.”

Tim turns, looks up at him, and pauses.

It feels almost *too* intimate, standing here chest-to-chest in the cramped bathroom, wisps of steam and yellow light spilling out into the darkened hallway. They’re not touching, but Tim is close enough that Kon can feel the heat of his body, the lingering warmth of the shower emanating from his skin. His shaggy hair flops across his forehead and one of his eyes as he looks up at him, and Kon has to tamp down the urge to stroke it back for him.

He shouldn’t have said that. That was too much, wasn’t it?

“Kon,” Tim starts, his voice soft. “Look. All jokes aside, I *am* sorry for making you feel… like you had to run away from me. I know I can be pushy, and I know you already know it’s coming from a place of, like,

wanting to help, but… still, it wasn't cool of me. I never want to make you have to run away, from *me,* ever again. So—I guess I'm just trying to say, um… I'm sorry, I won't do it again, and, uh, thank you. For letting me in."

Oh, for crying out loud—

Chest tight again, Kon wraps his arms around him and hugs him close. The ache beneath his ribs is back, muted but poignant, and he just—he just needs to hold him for a minute. Tim started driving at, what, six this morning? Sooner? And he thought Kon might be so mad at him he'd just tell him to turn around and drive right back, and he *still came.*

Tim sinks into him, wraps his arms around Kon and holds on snugly. His chin comes to rest on Kon's shoulder, and he lets out a weary, contented sigh. He must be *exhausted*, Kon thinks, and holds him a little tighter.

"Stop apologizing," Kon murmurs, and leans his cheek against Tim's hair. "I already forgave you that night itself."

Tim lets out a soft breath. "…But you still ignored my messages." It's not an accusation, but Kon still winces. "Why, if you weren't mad?"

Okay. This is probably gonna be a Conversation, with a capital C. Kon gives Tim a little squeeze.

"Let's go sit down, yeah?" he suggests, reluctantly drawing back. He risks linking his fingers with Tim's, reluctant to completely let go. Tim squeezes his hand back, and Kon smiles.

"Yeah," he agrees. "Although, fair warning, I might pass out on you mid-talk if we do."

"That's a risk I run every time I talk to you," Kon teases, leading the way back to his room. Tim scoffs, but still doesn't let go of his hand.

They settle onto Kon's bed like they have a thousand times before. Krypto doesn't even bother to lift his head; he just flicks an ear at them both, the very tip of his tail twitching against the blanket once. Tim heaves a weary sigh, leaning against the headboard, and Kon settles down at his side, careful to keep enough distance so that their legs don't brush. It's an awkward dance, making sure he doesn't get too close without making Tim think he doesn't want to touch him, but Kon thinks he's managing alright.

Tim, however, doesn't seem to care about any of that, because he just drops his head onto Kon's shoulder and sighs again. "…So." He gently rubs his thumb over Kon's knuckles. "You were saying?"

Kon sucks in a breath. He's extremely conscious of the weight of Tim's head on his shoulder, the press of his body at his side. Tim's hair smells of Kon's shampoo; Tim's dwarfed in Kon's shirt. He's never been more aware of every square inch of his right hand, his fingers intertwined with Tim's.

He's *not* going to make this weird.

"Kon?" Tim gently prompts.

Kon blows out his breath and squeezes Tim's hand again, grounding himself with the familiar touch of Tim's calluses. It's Tim. It's just Tim.

"So… I still, um. I can't tell you what I was, uh… running away from. But I, uh, can admit you were right and I *was* running from something major." He glances at Tim uncertainly, trying to vet his reaction.

Tim just keeps looking up at him through his eyelashes, head on his shoulder. He hums once, a soft and encouraging sound. Lightning flashes outside the window; a loud clap of thunder booms a second later.

"Sooo." Kon chews at his lower lip for a second. "I didn't answer you 'cuz I… Okay. Don't freak out, I'm *fine.* But I maybe did something kinda stupid, after I ran off. And then I was kind of just freaking out about it all weekend and, uh… you know. Honest to god, Rob, I just, like… didn't realize how long I'd been putting off talking to you about it." He bites his lip again and looks down at Tim. "I'm *really* sorry for scaring you like that."

"If you can tell me to stop apologizing to you, I think I can tell you the same," Tim says softly. There's a crease of worry between his brows, though, and he runs his thumb over the base of Kon's. "What happened? Are you—like, not to pry, but are you, uh… okay?"

Kon opens his mouth, pauses, and closes it again. "Uh… kind of," he says, more honestly than he means to. "I mean—yeah. Mostly. Sorta? Um." He winces. Why is he so bad at lying to Tim? "Don't worry about it, though."

Tim frowns. "Kon."

Oof. Kon puffs out his cheeks petulantly for a second. “Okay, fine. No, but you for real don’t gotta worry about it, ‘cuz I—I really don’t know how to talk about it, okay? But—but Kal and Lois and Ma all know now. So. I’m in good hands.”

Tim studies him for several seconds. He doesn’t lift his head from Kon’s shoulder, but his scrutiny is no less intense; if he were anyone else, Kon would squirm under its full force. Since it’s Tim, though, he stays relaxed, or as relaxed as he can while still hyper-aware of how little space there is between their bodies, anyhow.

“Okay,” Tim finally says. He sinks into Kon’s side a little more, his cheek squishing against Kon’s shoulder. Kon knows him—he’s not fully satisfied; he wants to know what *happened*—but this time, he restrains himself.

Warmth floods through Kon’s chest. He really is trying to keep ahold of himself, huh? He’s really, really trying.

“Okay,” Tim says again, more softly. “I’d—I mean, I hope you can tell me someday, but… that’s good enough for me, just… knowing you’re letting *someone* look after you.” He hesitates for a second. “So… are we good?”

“Yeah,” Kon says. The farmhouse roof creaks again in the wind. It’s easier to ignore with Tim’s weight comfortably pressed into his side. “We’re good, Robbie.”

Tim smiles. “Good.” His smile fades, just a little. “I was… a little worried.”

Kon squeezes his hand. “It’ll take more than this for you to get rid of me,” he promises, and immediately regrets it. His own ghost, dancing in the corner like Peter Pan’s shadow, laughs at him.

Tim winces. His heartbeat skips, speeds up. “Right,” he says, like a wounded animal doing everything it can to pretend it’s hale and hearty and whole, so it won’t get culled from the pack. “Yeah.”

“I didn’t mean it like that,” Kon says quietly, guilt climbing up his throat again. If he closes his eyes, he knows he’ll feel the metal rod grinding against his ribs with every breath. “I just meant…”

“I know what you meant,” Tim reassures him. It rings a little hollow.

Kon drops his head back against the headboard, queasy. “Sorry. I

didn't… god, I have *gotta* stop putting my foot in my mouth. I thought that was more your thing."

That makes Tim snort, at least. Small victories. He looks up at Kon for several seconds, drinking him in like a desert faced with the first rains of spring. Kon wonders how much of him it'll take to make Tim bloom like he deserves.

"You know I'm gonna worry about it anyway, right?" Tim asks quietly. "Even if I know you're in good hands? It's just—I can't not worry about you."

Kon softens. Squeezes his hand again. "Yeah, Robbie, I know. The feeling's mutual." He turns his head to the side, inhales the scent of coconut and plumeria from Tim's hair. Risks even brushing his lips against Tim's temple; it's not a kiss, but it's the idea of one.

Tim smiles, then lets out a soft sigh. "Okay." He drops his gaze down to the duvet, shoulders slumping a little. "Okay. So we're all good."

"Yeah," Kon agrees. "We're good. Now c'mon. Get under the covers 'n' lie down properly. You need sleep. Your eyebags have eyebags, dude."

"They're Chanel," Tim says dryly. "Really fashionable this year, you know."

Kon snorts and shakes his head. In the warm, yellow lamplight, Tim's face is soft and open; his wet hair falls across his forehead, and Kon's sleeve is a little damp. He really wants to wrap himself around Tim and never let go; the ache in his chest is strong enough he's afraid to let himself even acknowledge it.

"Sure," he answers. "Walk, walk, fashion baby. All the way under the covers and into sleep."

Tim huffs out a soft, breathy laugh. "Don't have to tell me twice," he says, and peels himself away from Kon's side to wriggle down properly into bed. For a fleeting heartbeat, Kon almost thinks he's reluctant to pull back, but he knows he's imagining it.

He flicks the lamp off with a brush of TTK. The darkness makes the storm outside feel louder; under the blankets, though, it feels safe.

Kon slips under the covers and settles in, curls up with his back to Tim, as the wind howls around the corners and the rain lashes at his window. He's careful not to slide too far into the bed, careful to keep

his body from brushing Tim's; on the other pillow, Tim just sighs, yawns, and snuggles into the blankets.

"Hey, Kon," he murmurs, sounding already halfway to drifting off. "… Can we do pancakes for breakfast?"

Kon's heart does something funny in his chest. "Yeah," he agrees, warm inside. "I think we can swing that."

"Swag," Tim mumbles, and heaves a sleepy sigh. "G'night."

"Night, Wonder," Kon answers, and closes his eyes.

He knows the storm will be gone by morning.

Chapter End Notes

> *With shortness of breath, I'll explain the infinite*
> *How rare and beautiful it truly is that we exist...*

- "Saturn" by Sleeping At Last.

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!